THE RETURN OF THE GREAT POWERS

BRENDAN SIMMS

THE RETURN OF THE GREAT POWERS

BRENDAN SIMMS

THE RETURN OF THE GREAT POWERS

BRENDAN SIMMS

BASIC BOOKS
New York

Copyright © 2026 by Brendan Simms
Cover design by Chin-Yee Lai
Cover images © BOLDG / Shutterstock.com
Cover copyright © 2026 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Basic Books
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
www.basicbooks.com

First Edition: June 2026

Published by Basic Books, an imprint of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Basic Books name and logo is a trademark of the Hachette Book Group.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or email HachetteSpeakers@hbgusa.com.

Basic Books books may be purchased in bulk for business, educational, or promotional use. For more information, please contact your local bookseller or the Hachette Book Group Special Markets Department at special.markets@hbgusa.com.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026932205

ISBNs: 9781541605831 (hardcover), 9781541605855 (ebook)

E3-20260408-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Title Page

Copyright

Dedication

Preface

Introduction: The New Great Power World

Part I: **THE RISE, ECLIPSE, AND RETURN OF THE GREAT POWERS**

Chapter One: What Is a Great Power?

Chapter Two: The Emergence of the Great Powers

Chapter Three: The Eclipse of the Great Powers

Chapter Four: The Return of ‘Peer Competition’

Part II: **THE ALMOST GREAT POWERS**

Chapter Five: The Self-Restraint of Japan

Chapter Six: The Travails of France

Chapter Seven: The Self-Denial of Germany

Chapter Eight: The Stalling of India

Chapter Nine: The Failure of the European Union

Part III: **THE GREAT POWERS OF TODAY**

Chapter Ten: The Rise of the People’s Republic of China

Chapter Eleven: The Survival of Russia

Chapter Twelve: The Persistence of the United Kingdom

Chapter Thirteen: The Continued Dominance of the United States

Part IV: **THE FUTURE OF THE GREAT POWERS**

Chapter Fourteen: The Global Futures of the Great Powers

Chapter Fifteen: The Regional Futures of the Great Powers

Epilogue

Discover More

Acknowledgements

Notes

About the Author

Praise for The Return of the Great Powers

To my family

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

Tap here to learn more.

BASIC
BOOKS

Preface

THIS BOOK IS primarily aimed at the general reader, who follows the news, and is conscious that geopolitics is returning to our dinner tables, boardrooms, and public life, but who wishes to look beyond the headlines at where the Great Powers have come from and where they might be going. Unlike those by John Mearsheimer, Kenneth Waltz, and other giants of political science, my book does not seek to offer a general theory of international politics, and it does not aspire to the magisterial sweep of Paul Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. Instead, the intention here is to provide a brief introduction to our new Great Power world in its wider historical context: where we are, who the main actors are, how we got here, and where we may end up.

Cambridge, 1.9.2025

Introduction

The New Great Power World

THE GREAT POWERS are back. Over the past ten years or so, the world has been rocked by the return of what the United States' 2017 National Security Strategy termed 'great power competition'. The threat from 'revisionist powers' such as Russia and especially China, rather than terrorism, was deemed to be the primary concern. Russia's nuclear systems were deemed to 'remain the most significant existential threat to the United States'. Those lines were written in the shadow of Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and the growth of Sino-American rivalry in East Asia. Today, after Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in February 2022 and the escalating tension in the Taiwan Strait, there can be no doubt that traditional 'geopolitics' has returned with a vengeance.[1]

For hundreds of years, our world had been one of Great Powers rising and falling. The resulting conflicts—for example, the Napoleonic Wars, the First World War, and the Second World War—came at enormous human cost. Then, after the end of the Cold War, we thought we had transcended the past, with the establishment of a new order based on international law and economic cooperation. Now we are returning to a Great Power system in which raw military might is rated higher than economic heft, the strength of legal arguments, or moral standing. In August 2025, for example, US President Donald Trump told the Ukrainians to 'make a deal', because 'Russia is a very big power and they are not'. His hierarchy would have been immediately familiar to our ancestors, but we are still struggling to understand it.

All this raises the stakes for a world which was already grappling with a series of major challenges: international terrorism, climate change, and illegal migration, to name but a few. None of these threats have gone away,

but today the prospect of sudden mass death is much more credible than it was even at the height of the ‘Global War on Terror’ after 2001, with its ‘dirty bombs’, bioweapons, and other ‘weapons of mass destruction’. This is because the danger of a full-scale nuclear exchange, or devastating conventional war, now looms larger than at any time since the height of the Second Cold War in the 1980s, not least because we have unlearned the rituals of deterrence even more comprehensively than we have forgotten the dynamics of Great Power rivalry. Geopolitics is thus the thing that may kill us before climate change does.[2]

Despite warning signs such as Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and China’s increasingly hawkish behaviour in the South China Sea, these developments took Western leaders and publics by surprise. They had become comfortable in what they believed to be an increasingly ‘globalised’ and ‘interdependent’ world in which the main challenges were ‘transnational’ rather than interstate. In 2005, British Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed that to debate globalisation was rather like discussing ‘whether autumn should follow summer’. In this world there were no Great Powers in the traditional sense, only one. It made sense to speak of multilateralism or unipolarity, but not of the kind of ‘multipolarity’ which had been routine in the Great Power world of the past.[3]

In 2014, immediately after Russia’s occupation of Crimea, German Chancellor Angela Merkel dismissed the Russian leader Vladimir Putin as a man who was living in the old Great Power world of the nineteenth century. Likewise, concerns about the growth of Chinese power were widely dismissed on both sides of the Atlantic, on the grounds that economic ‘engagement’ would turn the People’s Republic (PRC) into a ‘responsible stakeholder’, and that the trading relationship was a rising tide which would lift all political boats, in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East as well as in the developed world. These beliefs were convenient for Western political leaders as they sought to justify economic liberalisation and reductions in military expenditure.[4]

Now we know better. Sadly, it was Vladimir Putin who was ahead of the times and the chancellor who was trapped in the past. As we shall see, at most points during the past ten years or so, the major global actors have made decisions based on geopolitical rather than economic considerations:

Russia over Ukraine, the United Kingdom and the European Union over Brexit, and the United States and the PRC over economic ‘derisking’—that is, reducing trade and economic connectivity with China in our effort to minimize strategic vulnerabilities. Just as we were shocked by the willingness of Putin, in particular, to jeopardise Russia’s energy markets over Ukraine, so both the Russian Federation and the PRC have underestimated the determination of the West to defend the international order even at considerable economic cost.

This colossal failure of geopolitical understanding extends well beyond government. Universities made big bets on the flow of foreign students from potentially hostile states. Many academics turned their backs on area studies, political and international history, and the study of the Great Powers. Supposedly unsentimental and undogmatic corporations drank heavily from the well of ‘globalisation’, making them huge profits, for sure, but also leaving them with vulnerable supply chains and considerable sunk costs in foreign jurisdictions. Nongovernmental organisations segmented the world into single issues—for example, labour rights, human trafficking, and the environment—but failed to see the larger geostrategic picture. This failure has cost all of those entities, and all of us, dearly.

The misplaced optimism about the direction of the world and the inability to spot the return of Great Power rivalry rested on mistaken assumptions about history, about globalisation and the superiority of economics over geopolitics and national cultures, and about the nature of Russia and China. Given the events in former Yugoslavia in 1991–1999 and in New York in September 2001, not many believed that ‘history had ended’ with the disintegration of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, but most were convinced that the time of Great Power conflict was firmly past. ‘Global governance’, not ‘balance of power’, and ‘complex emergencies’, not ‘peer competition’, were the watchwords. The world economic order which emerged after the collapse of the communist regimes in Europe and China’s economic shift away from Marxism was variously described as ‘neo-liberal’, ‘globalised’, and ‘interdependent’. In this ‘flat’ world, states and boundaries mattered less and less. Capital and labour flowed increasingly freely across borders. Technology was supposedly annihilating distance.

Those who had not yet arrived at the ‘West’, in particular China and Russia, would eventually end up there through a process of ‘engagement’.[5]

There were many critiques of this model, with its winners and losers, but few made the obvious point that globalisation was bound to fail in a Great Power world. The two were not merely incompatible conceptually, but strategically and operationally as well, as the Ukraine war in 2022 was to show. Great Power rivalry made a mockery of economic interdependence, because dependencies—such as energy—could be weaponised. Worse still, it put a big question mark over outsourcing, technology transfer, and just about every other economic practice. Once secure supply chains suddenly looked vulnerable. The world was no longer flat, and at the key ‘chokepoints’ it suddenly seemed very narrow. Interdependence, as some had long warned, could be ‘weaponized’. As Larry Fink, the legendary head of the world’s largest asset manager, BlackRock, put it in March 2022, ‘The Russian invasion of Ukraine has put an end to the globalization we have experienced over the last three decades.’[6]

When westerners ask ‘who lost Russia and China’ or ‘why’ they did so, they forget that these countries were not theirs to lose. Contrary to what many hoped or believed, the PRC and the Russian Federation were never really headed in a liberal democratic direction, and they were consequently not derailed from that path, at least not by the West. Instead, both polities were and are exploring alternative paths to modernity which would enable them to constitute separate ‘poles’ in a world dominated by Western power.

The result is a completely different international environment to the one which we became used to after the end of the Cold War. World events are primarily driven by geopolitics, not economics or law. Transnational ‘governance’ is receding as the major powers jostle for primacy. The new question—which previous generations frequently asked themselves—is whether these players will maintain a balance between each other, or one of them will achieve complete dominance over the others. Weaker actors, who had long sheltered under the umbrella of the rules-based international order, are running for cover. In this new world, states matter, and the biggest states, the Great Powers, matter most of all.

That said, the Great Powers do not determine everything and sometimes they fail to get their way. Having avoided the ‘globalist’ snares, we must not fall into the ‘realist’ trap of exalting the strong and dismissing the apparently weak. The United States was unable to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the Russian Federation is failing to impose its will on Ukraine. Moreover, the Great Power world is—by definition—dynamic. Historically, powers have risen and fallen, and they will continue to do so. Some polities are footballs for centuries until they are not. In 1871, unification turned Germany from an object of the Great Powers into a Great Power itself. In 2022, Ukraine—for hundreds of years a thoroughfare for the Great Powers—defied Russia and became a factor in world politics in its own right.

Furthermore, if smaller actors sometimes risk being crushed by or between the Great Powers, they can also play them off against each other. The North Italian Duchy of Savoy did this for hundreds of years before the nineteenth century; many ‘Third World’ states did it during the Cold War; and much of the ‘Global South’ has been trying to do this in the face of the war in Ukraine. Indeed, sometimes smaller states can ‘wag the dog’ by manipulating stronger sponsors into conflicts they had not intended to join. Today, there are more countries in the world than ever before, and the neutrals—or non-aligned ones—are much stronger than they have been for a very long time.[7]

Nor does the return of the Great Powers mean that we can dismiss non-state actors. If the West was shocked by the revival of Russian territorial ambitions with the annexation of Crimea in early 2014, it was soon reminded of the importance of radical Islamism by the triumph of ISIS later that summer. If it was thunderstruck by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it was reminded of the importance of non-state actors by the Hamas attacks on Israel of October 2023 and their ramifications throughout the Middle East and more widely. ‘Realists’, who often discount the role and rights of non–Great Power actors, thus often create a hierarchy which does not exist.

It is also true that the Great Powers are to a greater or lesser extent constrained by international institutions. It is not simply the case that, as the Greek historian Thucydides famously put it in his ‘Melian Dialogue’, ‘the

strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must'. That has happened, does happen, and will continue to happen, but the world is not just a jungle. The Great Powers operate within a system of institutions, rules, and norms which are not always obeyed but cannot be disregarded without cost. Here we confront a paradox. The Great Powers create international institutions which both empower and constrain them, such as the World Trade Organization, the International Criminal Court, and other structures. This is because the hegemon of the day hopes that the regional or global architecture it established will outlive its military dominance. It often does, but only until the point when the tension between the institutional superstructure and the changed underlying power dynamics becomes too great. The resulting conflict then produces a new balance and a new set of structures.[8]

Finally, the global powers both shape and are shaped by wider global processes. Economic growth, in both its state and corporate variants, changes the relationships between states. The stupendous 'rise' of China, for example, has fuelled Beijing's challenge not merely to the Indo-Pacific but to the global order. The American response, be it President Joe Biden's 'derisking' or Trump's planned 'decoupling', has had significant implications for the world economy. Technological progress, often driven by interstate ambition, adds new domains to Great Power contention, such as space and cyber, and if asymmetrical, can shift the balance of power between the Great Powers. Demographic shifts—whether from birthrates, migration, or settler colonialism—are often caused by the actions of Great Powers and can profoundly change the relationships between them. Cultural and ideological shifts—for example, the growth of environmentalism—can change geopolitical dynamics.[9]

The natural world, too, is in constant flux. The 'geography' in geopolitics is not as variable as the 'politics', but it is by no means fixed. Technological change made the Suez and Panama Canals possible, completely altering not merely the physical but also the strategic geography of their regions. Climate change causes rivers to run low, lakes to dry up, deserts to grow, ice to melt, and sea levels to rise. In the Arctic, this has already changed the geopolitical picture by opening up more of the region to transit trade, resource extraction, and military competition. In the Pacific

and Indian Oceans, whole islands, some of them of vital strategic importance, are threatened with submergence. The ‘green transition’ drives a new scramble for resources as states seek to secure the precious ‘critical metals’ needed to power it.

In short, the Great Powers made and make our world, and yet they do not do so entirely according to their own desires, but subject to context, contingency, and forces beyond their direct control.

The Great Powers contend at two levels, the global and the regional. Globally, they compete over the ‘commons’, especially the sea-lanes on which so much of the world’s commerce depends; over access to resources, especially energy and food; over regulatory dominance; over internet domains; and over the political and moral high ground, which can be translated into geopolitical advantage through ‘narratives’. Across the globe, the Great Powers intervene in domestic politics, through democracy promotion or autocracy protection, in order to defend allies, destabilise or ‘flip’ enemies, and attract neutrals.

Regionally, Russia and its competitors face off in Europe, in particular Ukraine, the Baltic, the Arctic, and the Eastern Mediterranean; the PRC and their only formal ally, North Korea, confront the United States, Japan, India, and their allies in the Indo-Pacific, notably in the Himalayas, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, Taiwan, and the South Pacific. Africa and Latin America are increasingly caught up in Great Power struggles over influence, bases, and resource extraction. The Middle East is contested by most of the Great Powers, sometimes directly, but usually via proxies; this fact is one of the few things all the protagonists in the region can agree on. Only Antarctica remains, by treaty, an area barred to Great Power interference. The global and the regional meet in the critical chokepoints, such as the Panama Canal, Gibraltar, the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the Strait of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca.

This new Great Power world is fluid and confusing; even its basic geometry is unclear. In the early 2020s, much of the globe seemed to be grouping into two camps or ‘orders’. On the one side, there was the Western camp, consisting of the United States, the United Kingdom, the EU (or most of it), and their allies. On the other side, there was the authoritarian camp,

consisting of the PRC, the Russian Federation, and their allies. Some powers, including very important ones like India, which is close to Russia but hostile to China, and therefore open to limited cooperation with the West, straddled the two orders. Then the second Trump administration, inaugurated in January 2025, seemed to set the United States on a collision course with its closest allies in the Western camp. The world suddenly looked multipolar rather than bi-order.

The interplay between the Great Powers should not be understood as a bloodless ‘system’ which operates according to a commonly agreed rationality, or even a ‘society’ based on shared values. No Great Power thinks or acts like another. They all have distinct identities which have developed over time. This makes history critical to understanding not merely the origins of the Great Powers but their trajectory. For example, as we shall see, the United States was born as both a Great Power and an anti–Great Power project, a tension which has characterised its position in the world from the start. Modern Germany and modern Japan both originated in defeat and disgrace nearly eighty years ago, and this heritage continues to shape their engagement with the world today.

It is among the ‘challenger’ powers, though, where the importance of the past is most obvious. The actual history here is less important than the remembered history, and especially the way in which it is re-interpreted for political purposes. ‘The past’, as the novelist Georgi Gospodinov says in *Time Shelter*, ‘is not just that which happened to you. Sometimes it is that which you just imagined.’ Vladimir Putin signalled his plan to attack Ukraine with a series of increasingly strident ‘history’ lectures. The growing re-interpretation of its pre-communist past shows that China believes that it is not so much ‘rising’ as resuming its natural place. Likewise, the rediscovery of India’s ‘past glory’ under Prime Minister Narendra Modi signals his intent for the future. If you want to know where a Great Power may be heading, look at where it thinks it came from.[10]

Of course, history is neither a prison nor a crystal ball. The Great Powers are not like atoms or molecules. We cannot predict with certainty how they will behave, particularly not when they are under pressure. The Great Powers are led by human beings, sometimes just by a single individual, and they do not act according to a common or agreed rationality,

but according to their own different rationalities. This is a phenomenon which our current age and temperament is peculiarly unsuited to comprehend. There is no ‘data’, only historical precedent, and there are no definitive ‘answers’, only degrees of understanding.

The Great Powers are thus a force for diversity in the world. As we shall see, the principal purpose of ‘Great Powerness’ for states like Russia, India, and the PRC is to enable them to defend and promote their separate identities and all that these entail, such as culture, a political system, and an economic orientation. If this capability is often intended to be to the detriment or even the exclusion of other identities, the resulting balance between the Great Powers has in practice tended to preserve rather than eliminate difference. The return of the Great Powers over the past twenty years or so is therefore partly an inevitable righting of the balance after an era of US unipolarity and partly a reaction against the homogenising effects of globalisation. Of course, the price for avoiding a global monologue in which everyone says more or less the same thing is that we often have to listen to things we would rather not hear.

The human and economic cost of this diversity, though, is enormous. In Ukraine, to take just one example, by the end of 2024, Russia’s Great Power ambitions have killed or injured more than forty thousand Ukrainian civilians, perhaps one hundred thousand Ukrainian soldiers, and maybe up to a million Russians. Figures vary considerably, but the scale of the bloodshed is not in doubt. Nor is the financial price: The United Nations reckons it will cost $486 billion to reconstruct the country. More broadly, the global expenditure on nuclear weapons alone represents a huge drain on resources which could—if the world were a better place—be spent on improving the lot of populations in nuclear-armed states. Global diversity does not come for free: There is always a hefty, and often bloody, fee.

Finally, the contest of the Great Powers is not, and never has been, a simple morality play. To be sure, a westerner might argue, and this author *would* argue, that the Anglo-American world order which emerged in the late nineteenth century, and which later developed into the ‘liberal international order’, is the world’s best bet today. But even if that is true—and most of the rest of the globe and many in the West itself would deny it—it is also the case that the attempts to defend and expand this order have had morally complicated consequences. This is what has been called the

‘tragedy’ of the Great Powers. The tension between order and justice, and the clash between irreconcilable rights and interests, lie at the heart of the whole system and cannot be resolved so long as there are Great Powers.[11]

This book is divided into four parts and fifteen chapters. Part I deals with the background. Chapter One examines what makes a Great Power. This is followed by a brief synoptic account of the formation of the modern Great Power system in Chapter Two. Chapter Three describes the temporary eclipse of the Great Powers after the end of the Cold War. Chapter Four deals with the return of ‘peer competition’ after the apparent triumph of unipolarity and globalisation around the turn of the millennium, taking the story from the second decade of the century to the present day.

The countries or unions which have failed to sustain or articulate Great Power ambitions today are dealt with in Part II: Japan (Chapter Five), France (Chapter Six), Germany (Chapter Seven), India (Chapter Eight), and the European Union (Chapter Nine). Part III explains why there are only four real Great Powers in the world today: the People’s Republic of China (Chapter Ten), Russia (Chapter Eleven), the United Kingdom (Chapter Twelve), and the United States (Chapter Thirteen). Finally, Part IV looks at the future of the Great Powers, with Chapter Fourteen reflecting on how the future of the Great Powers might look at the global level, and Chapter Fifteen doing so from the regional perspective.

This approach requires a shift of voice between the parts and sometimes between chapters. The opening three historical chapters, and the concluding ones on the futures of the Great Powers, are written from the Western vantage point of the author. I then try to understand each power on its own terms—what it wants to do, and probably will do—before moving on to what it should do. This book does not draw out any overarching historical ‘lessons’ or set out an alternative strategy for the West or for anyone else. Instead, my purpose is to provide a sense of where the most important state actors today came from, where they *think* they came from, and where they might be headed.

Each country chapter is—roughly—divided into five sections. The first section deals with the historical background up to the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century and includes an assessment of whether

the past acts as a motor or as a constraint for the country's positioning in the world. This is followed, secondly, by an assessment of the extent to which the country regards itself as a Great Power and why. Third, I turn to the strategic preoccupations of that power over the past ten years or so, both globally and regionally, before discussing that country's responses to those challenges in the fourth section. Wherever possible, I try to allow the protagonists to speak for themselves.

In the fifth section of the country chapters, I assess the putative Great Power of today according to four criteria. First of all, *Resources*: Does the state in question have the absolute and relative economic, demographic, military, raw material, and other resources to sustain a Great Power position over time? Second, *Reach*: Is the state a global or merely a regional power, and how willing and able is it to deploy force far from home? Does it have a recognised 'sphere of influence'? Third, *Reputation*: Is that state considered a Great Power by others, especially other Great Powers, and, almost as importantly, does it consider itself a Great Power? Does it have the necessary ambition? Fourth, *Resilience*: How much pain can the state's society and economy absorb over a long period of time? The historical performance will play an important role here.

In the final part of the book, I ruminate on where the Great Powers might go over the next ten years or so. Will they succumb, as Russia already seems to be doing, to 'overstretch'? Might they even coalesce in a planetary coalition—for example, to combat climate change? Which powers will 'rise' and which will 'fall'? Will any of them lose Great Power status, newly attain it, or recover it? I will address these questions in the knowledge that many distinguished scholars have tried and failed in the past to predict the future.

I will conclude that, while there are significant power differentials between the Great Powers today, with the United States and China far ahead of Russia and the United Kingdom, all four states have attributes which mark them out from the next ten or so major actors on the world scene. There is also one country, France, whose Great Power status is unclear. Although the balance between the actors has shifted considerably, this configuration is in some respects similar to the order erected in 1945, in which there were five permanent members of the UN Security Council—

the Soviet Union, (Nationalist) China, Britain, France, and the United States.

So for all the profound changes we have experienced in other areas, the Great Powers of today would have been recognisable not merely to our grandparents but our great-grandparents. In all likelihood, they will remain so to our children and grandchildren. And yet, as this book also shows, the Great Powers will certainly interact and clash in ways that are new and unsettling. They will shape our lives whether we like it or not. To adapt a phrase attributed to Leon Trotsky, even if you are not interested in the Great Powers, they are certainly interested in us.

Part I

THE RISE, ECLIPSE, AND RETURN OF THE GREAT POWERS

One

What Is a Great Power?

IT IS EASIER to speak about the Great Powers than to define them. Some of the best books on the subject make no systematic attempt to do so: The Great Powers are either taken for granted or emerge in the telling. Besides, any definition is bound to be hotly debated not merely by scholars but by the states and statesmen themselves. Disagreement over Great Power status, and especially over which power is great or the 'greatest', has characterised not only the system itself today and in times past but also later historical accounts. Which powers rose and which fell often remains contested, even in retrospect. There is, in fact, neither a commonly accepted definition of what constituted or constitutes a 'Great Power' nor any consensus over such basic questions as how many Great Powers there were or are.

What makes a Great Power has always been geographically and culturally bounded. When Renaissance Italians referred to the 'big powers'—*potenze grosse*—they meant states that were big to them and close by. They did not mean China or Persia, though they were much bigger, and they were perfectly aware of the existence of those states. We might therefore reproach them, and those who came after, for their 'Eurocentricity', but there would be little point in doing so. Likewise, participants in the eighteenth-century European 'balance of power' system were very much aware of the importance of overseas territories for the European equilibrium, but they did not take much account of extra-European actors, except perhaps the Ottoman Empire, and later Spain, France, and England's American colonies. Towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the 'Leading Powers' were defined in the preparatory memorandum to the Congress of Vienna as 'the Powers most competent to frame for consideration a project of *European* settlement'.[1]

Yet, the Western system of Great Powers was only one of several, at least before 1800. In the Middle East, the Ottoman Empire, Safavid Persia, and Moghul India were locked in a complicated dance. Farther east, China was long so dominant that we cannot really speak of Great Powers or a balance of power in that region. China's emperor presided over a hierarchical relationship in which neighbouring polities paid 'tribute' to the 'Middle Kingdom' which lay at the heart of the regional order. He showed little interest in the wider world, and his subjects would have been mystified at the notion that there could be any Great Power other than China. It is therefore only from the late nineteenth century, with the rise of the United States and Japan, and now the ascent of the People's Republic of China, that it makes sense to speak of a truly 'global' Great Power system.

One way or another, when contemporaries spoke of the Great Powers, they meant the principal actors who shaped their world. That's still what we mean now, though instead of the Europe of ages past, we're referring to a new global balance. But how does one decide which power is 'great' and which not? Who or what confers this status?

In 1833, Leopold von Ranke, the legendary great-grandfather of the historical profession, penned his iconic essay on 'The Great Powers'. This was written for a magazine established at the request of the Prussian Foreign Office and was thus no mere scholarly exercise. Ranke defined a Great Power in maximal terms: one which could survive an attack by all the other powers in the system. He also believed that the Great Powers were not simply carbon copies of each other, but instead represented a particular principle, be it religious, cultural, or political.[2]

To the celebrated late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan, the key to global power was control of the sea, which is why he regarded the British Empire and the rising United States as the true global hegemons. The pioneering British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder argued, by contrast, that the future lay with the great land powers, the Tsarist Empire and the growing Wilhelmine Reich, which held sway over the Eurasian landmass—the Russian 'Heartland' and its surrounding Afro-Eurasian 'World Island'—with the help of a rapidly expanding railway network. 'Whoever rules Eastern Europe will rule the Heartland,' Mackinder pronounced, 'whoever rules the

Heartland will rule the World Island, and whoever rules the World Island will rule the World.'[3]

Both Mahan's and Mackinder's arguments—which, as we shall see, still have widespread currency today—chimed with a contemporary discourse which saw size as the key to power. To the 'World Power' theorists around the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it was axiomatic that Great Power standing could not rest on European possessions alone. On their reading, the fate of the world lay in the hands of the vast territorial empires: Britain, on whose flag the sun famously never set, and Tsarist Russia, France, the United States, and upstart Japan. During the Third Reich this thinking culminated in the *Grossraum*, or 'Great Spaces', theory of the German international lawyer Carl Schmitt. In his view, which has enjoyed a renaissance in Russia and the PRC in recent years, the world was, or should be, dominated by a number of territorially defined and ideologically distinct hegemons whose authority radiates out into their neighbourhoods.[4]

Before the First World War some distinguished between the established Great Powers, such as the British Empire, which controlled the world's resources, and 'young' powers, such as the German Reich, which were striving to join or supplant them. During the interwar period, E. H. Carr, in many ways the founder of the British discipline of international relations, contrasted the 'have' powers—Britain, France, and the United States—with the 'have-not' challenger powers. 'The fundamental division', he wrote, 'is between those who are in the main satisfied with the present international distribution of the world's goods and those who are not.'[5]

Over the next fifty years or so, the study of the Great Powers remained a staple of often very good historical and political science research, but little of it moved the needle much in terms of wider public thinking on the subject. That changed in the late 1980s with the appearance of the historian Paul Kennedy's renowned *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*. He was concerned with a different sort of size: that of the economy. Though he was not the first to make this argument, Kennedy made the most eloquent and authoritative case so far that power rested on an economic base and that power shifts were largely presaged by economic ones. This could take the form of either a decline, brought on by attempting too many tasks at the same time—'imperial over-stretch'—or a rise powered by endogenous

economic growth. There might well be a time lag between the two, but ultimately, economic strength would translate into global power.[6]

Kennedy's *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, published at a time of intense American angst about its economic performance in the face of rapid German and (especially) Japanese growth, was not only 'falling out of briefcases' all over Washington but also featured in the 1990 Hollywood blockbuster *Navy Seals*; more recently, it was found in the library of the Islamist terrorist leader Osama bin Laden at his hideout in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

During the past thirty years or so, categorisation of the Great Powers has taken two broad forms. The 'realist' perspective was most robustly expressed by John Mearsheimer in his seminal *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. He identified military capacity, especially on land, as the key attribute. Some—still broadly within the realist tradition, such as Edward Luttwak—argued that economic power was more important, that 'geo-economics' had superseded traditional geopolitics. Others pointed to more intangible factors. The scholar-practitioner Joseph Nye, for example, distinguished between 'hard' military or economic power and the 'soft' power of attraction. Getting people to want to be like you was more effective than forcing them to be so. John Ikenberry argued that the Great Powers were characterised by their ability to create legitimate supranational institutions which would outlast their purely military superiority. Like the United Nations Security Council, these structures were at one and the same time products of Great Power politics, instruments of Great Power policy, and bodies which aspirant Great Powers lobbied to join.[7]

More recently, popular understanding of the Great Powers has been heavily influenced by Graham Allison's book on the *Thucydides Trap*. The ancient Athenian historian Thucydides wrote in his book *The Peloponnesian War* that 'it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable'. 'Thucydides's Trap', Allison explained, 'refers to the natural, inevitable discombobulation that occurs when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power.' In his view, 'when a rising power threatens to displace a ruling power, the resulting structural stress makes a violent clash the rule, not the exception'. It is not hard to see why this idea resonated at a time when publics were routinely

being warned of a looming clash between the United States and the People's Republic of China.[8]

If there was once a deep conceptual gulf separating West and East over the idea of the Great Powers, this has long ceased to be the case. Today, Chinese leaders and writers routinely refer to 'Big Country Diplomacy' or 'Major Country Diplomacy'. They take for granted that the People's Republic is a 'big country' or 'major country', which entitles it to greater rights than the 'little countries'. 'China is a big country,' a Chinese foreign minister told his Singaporean counterpart fifteen years ago, 'and other countries are little countries, and that's just a fact.' Moreover, the enthusiastic adoption by the Chinese leader Xi Jinping of the idea of a 'Thucydides Trap' shows just how much the idea of a Great Power world has become common global parlance.[9]

The Great Powers have never been 'representative'; they reflect realities rather than global diversity. One might lament this fact, but doing so would not greatly increase our understanding. To be sure, the supposedly 'rising powers' of today, the 'BRICS' (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) are often seen as the protagonists of the 'Global South'. India affects to be a 'different kind of great power'. The PRC, which is now very much a 'risen' power, still presents as a 'developing' state. Russia, a long-standing Great Power, nevertheless claims to protect the interests of the wretched of the earth. The BRICS are the new 'have-nots' who are challenging the Western 'haves' to allow them access to their fair share of the world's resources.

Determining Great Powerness is an art, not a science. If the categorisation of the Great Powers followed an agreed body of knowledge, there would be no need for the arbitration of war. Great Powerness is profoundly subjective, in that status has to be conferred as well as sought, and yet it is by no means arbitrary either. Impostors will sooner or later find their claims rejected, either peacefully or militarily. A Great Power is as a Great Power does. It will behave and be accepted as one, until it doesn't or isn't. The Irish historian William Mulligan, writing in the *Oxford Dictionary of World History*, calls this the 'Duck' test: 'If it acts like a Great Power and is treated like a Great Power, then it is a Great Power.'[10]

We can distinguish the Great Powers, past and present, by a set of characteristics. They expect to shape, or at least be consulted on, the main global issues of the day. Great Powers are the principal axes around which the world turns. They make their presence felt, and their absence creates a vacuum to be filled. ‘The theory, like the story, of international relations’, the celebrated political scientist Kenneth Waltz writes, ‘is written in terms of the Great Powers of an era.’ This role gives them special rights, but also special duties. ‘The price of greatness’, Winston Churchill once said, ‘is responsibility.’[11]

Often, Great Powers will insist on their own absolute sovereignty but admit only the qualified sovereignty of lesser powers, especially if they are nearby. In extremis, they reserve the right to change regimes which threaten or displease them, but are able completely to deny any such right with respect to themselves. This marks them out from the middling and smaller players, which at best have a choice of pole around which to orbit, but frequently have even that decision made for them. At times, the Great Powers will claim to be above international law. At other times, they will make a virtue of vindicating that law, or claim to set and defend international norms. The Great Powers, in other words, have the power to make the rules and also to break them; they are never just rule-takers. They are the orderers, not the ordered.[12]

Contrary to what Mearsheimer claims, though, a Great Power will not always seek domination, or at least not global mastery. Many challengers have sought, and still seek, no more than the co-management of the world, as they understood or understand it. Moreover, the Great Powers do not invariably act in a way that we consider rational or self-interested. They will go to war for what seem like quixotic reasons. They make mistakes or succumb to passion and hubris. They act out of fear or a sense of honour. Usually, though, they simply follow their own rationality, which may be very different from our own.[13]

What enables the Great Powers to behave in this way are their superior *capabilities* compared to the middling and smaller states. There are many ways of measuring capabilities—for example, as defined by the International Institute for Strategic Studies’ Military Balance, the European Council on Foreign Relations’ Power Atlas, the Best Countries Rankings

(BAV Group and the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania), the Global Firepower Index, the Correlates of War Project, the Global Power Index, the Composite Index of National Capability, and the Audit of Geopolitical Capability. Drawing on these and other approaches, this book assesses the capabilities of today's Great Powers according to four criteria: resources, reach, reputation, and resilience.

The first is *Resources*. Does the state in question have the military capacity to impose its will or to resist that of others? Does it have enough operational tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery pieces, aircraft, ships, drones, and trained servicemen and women? Relatedly, does the state have the technological and innovative edge to enable that military force, or to prevent its disabling, and to maintain connectivity across government and society? There is no entirely satisfactory way of assessing military strength, but how much the state spends on its military, and how effectively, is a rough measure of its defence capabilities.

Deployable nuclear weapons are a vital component of Great Powerness today. The guaranteed ability to deliver an atomic bomb and thus to deter a nuclear attack gives a state a special position in the world. This is why the Great Powers take on the resulting immense burdens of planning, researching, maintaining, storing, training, and safeguarding associated with those weapons. Of course, nuclear weapons have their limitations. Their absence did not mean that the Soviet Union was not a Great Power between 1945 and 1950, and having them did not save it from dissolution forty years later. Today, although the possession of nuclear weapons may not in itself be a sufficient condition for Great Powerness, it is certainly an indispensable one. Not all nuclear powers are Great Powers, but all Great Powers are nuclear.

Demography is also very important. Is the state populous enough to support Great Power ambitions? Are its inhabitants sufficiently healthy and fit? Of course, size alone is not decisive. Some very populous countries are not considered to be Great Powers—for example, Bangladesh has more inhabitants than Britain and France combined. Having said that, a small country, however well-armed and well-organised, will struggle to make the list. Israel is clearly a major regional actor, and it looms large in the global imagination, for various reasons. But few serious observers would regard a country of about ten million people as a Great Power.

A state's resources also encompass its economy. Is the state strong enough to survive the financial headwinds of geopolitical competition and to sustain a substantial military effort? Usually, economic strength is measured by gross domestic product (GDP), which covers everything produced within a state's borders, and sometimes by gross national product (GNP), which also includes everything its citizens and businesses produce beyond its borders. Here we need to be wary of manipulated data, and of the fact that GDP measures all economic activity rather than liabilities and assets. It is rather like judging a company by its turnover rather than its profits and asset balances.[14]

Moreover, both GDP and GNP take no account of actual buying power. The alternative metric of purchasing power parity (PPP) takes into account how far a sum of money goes in the domestic economy. This metric privileges non-Western countries with lower standards of living and production costs. It is for this reason that assessments of Russian power based primarily on GDP have been so awry. The country is self-sufficient in energy and contains all the raw materials needed for weapons manufacturing. It also boasts a state capitalist economy and shadow financial system largely independent of Western oversight. This enables Russia to punch very considerably beyond its apparent economic weight and helped it to mitigate international sanctions in ways not open to other powers.

Drilling down a bit further, we need to ask what access the state has to energy and key raw materials: oil, gas, coal, wind, solar, iron ore, and the rare metals needed to power the green transition. Does it have the infrastructure and shipping necessary to transport them? Can it feed itself, or does it at least enjoy secure access to foodstuffs? Can it produce or source, if necessary, the additional military equipment needed to sustain Great Power status in the event of armed conflict? If it is important in our post-industrial age not to fetishize manufacturing base, the experience of the Ukraine war has underlined the importance of being able to replace materiel quickly, reliably, and independently.[15]

Economic power is clearly important, but it is not conclusive. Today, economically significant actors such as Germany lack the ambition or capabilities, such as nuclear weapons or conventional military reach, to be

Great Powers. Likewise, some states, such as Russia, draw heavily on their energy resources to support their Great Power ambitions, while others, such as the PRC, are relatively resource poor, at least with regard to foodstuffs, fossil fuel energy, and most raw materials.[16]

Very important, and very difficult to assess, is the question how *national* these resources are. Peacetime GDP, GDP in a conflictual situation, and wartime GDP are three very different things. Cut a state off from its markets, sources of credit, raw materials, and food supply through tariffs, sanctions, or a blockade, and its economy will soon take on a completely different aspect. This is where command of the global commons outside the jurisdiction of any one state—particularly the world's sea-lanes—is so important to determining Great Power status, or at least the hierarchy among the Great Powers.

In short, resources themselves are not decisive. The state must also have the capacity to mobilise its potential. As we shall see, past assessments of Great Power capabilities have sometimes gone seriously awry, and it stands to reason that many of today's assessments will not stand up when put to the test.

The second criterion I use in the assessment of Great Powers is *Reach*. Is the state a global or merely a regional power, and how willing and able is it to deploy force far from home? Does it have a recognised geographical 'sphere of influence' in which its hegemony is recognized, and perhaps even welcomed or requested? Can that state draw on a global network of bases? Does it control key transport nodes and chokepoints? Can its intelligence agencies provide top-quality information on most parts of the world, as well as for cyberspace and space? Does it have a large and sophisticated diplomatic service? Can it practice sophisticated statecraft? Has it a large overseas aid budget? Reach can be both geographic and virtual. A Great Power will have the capacity to make its presence felt well beyond its own region, but it will also have the capacity to influence or even co-opt global institutions such as the United Nations, the markets, or other fora.[17]

Reach is important for two reasons. First, it is what differentiates a Great Power from the stronger 'middle powers', such as Turkey and Nigeria, which might dominate parts of their wider neighbourhood but lack the

capability to project militarily across the world. The importance of reach was vividly illustrated when Vladimir Putin took such umbrage of President Barack Obama's description of Russia as a merely 'regional' power, and therefore not a Great Power. Second, reach is critical to guaranteeing what the American political scientist Barry Posen termed the 'Command of the Commons'. The ability to protect one's own supply chains and energy supplies, and to disrupt those of adversaries, is central to global power.[18]

Today, reach is very unevenly distributed among powers. The United States stands out through its network of military bases, which spans much of the globe. Britain does not enjoy the same global position it once did, but still maintains important sovereign bases worldwide, including Gibraltar, Cyprus, and the Falkland Islands; it also has a presence in places like Duqm in Oman on the Indian Ocean. France still enjoys a lot of influence in Africa and has a significant presence in the Indo-Pacific. Russia not merely claims a sphere of influence in its 'near-abroad' but has recently intervened in Syria and other places. Russia also enjoys global reach in the fields of propaganda, disinformation, and disruptive digital activity. The PRC, too, is becoming a major global military player, with a base in Djibouti and a large paramilitary presence protecting infrastructural projects across the world. Its real global reach, though, lies in its partial control of the world's supply chains and critical minerals (such as lithium) needed to power the technological and green revolutions. By contrast, Germany, Japan, India, Indonesia, and Brazil have purely regional military reach.

The third criterion is *Reputation*. Is the state considered a Great Power by others, especially other Great Powers, and, almost as importantly, does it consider itself a Great Power? Does it have the necessary ambition? Some polities, like the late nineteenth-century United States, might have been objectively Great Powers, but without generally thinking of themselves in those terms. By contrast, there have been many countries, such as mid-twentieth-century Italy or post–World War II France, which considered themselves Great Powers but were not in fact any such thing. Today, it is quite common to hail various contenders, such as India, Brazil, and even South Korea and Indonesia, as new Great Powers. In this book I will draw on opinion polling and other metrics, qualitative judgements by informed observers and protagonists, and the rich literature on Great Power status to

assess which states consider themselves to be Great Powers and which are considered to be so by others.[19]

Moreover, a Great Power always stands for something beyond just brute force. Its greatness is cultural and ideological as well as military. Today, the United Kingdom and other Western powers stand for a liberal international order based on democratic principles and free trade. Other powers have positioned themselves in more civilisational terms. For example, Xi Jinping has said that the PRC, as a ‘major country’, should conduct ‘a distinctive’ diplomacy marked by ‘a salient Chinese feature and a Chinese vision’. India represents an ancient culture and non-alignment. Even Russia, perhaps the most brutal of the Great Powers, and which constantly emphasises its military and especially nuclear might, claims that it represents ‘Christian’ and ‘family’ values globally against the ‘soulless’ West. What exactly the United States stands for after the second coming of Donald Trump in 2025 is not yet clear.[20]

History, of course, is a major part of a Great Power’s reputation, because it will look to the past for confirmation of its distinct and constitutive role in the world today. It will often insist on the vindication of ‘historic rights’, such as those articulated by the PRC towards Taiwan and the South China Sea, and those asserted by Russia against Ukraine, to name only the most prominent examples. Great Powers believe themselves to have had a ‘great past’, but this history is not actually past—it is constantly evolving, and indeed changing, to support present-day ambitions.[21]

Reputation is central to ‘soft power’, the ability to get others to want what you want or at least not to oppose it. Among the Great Powers this is in essence a ‘story-telling competition’. It is a clash of narratives in which Hollywood, Broadway, Facebook, Twitter, the British Council, the Premier League, the Louvre, Alibaba, TikTok, and other non-state actors supplement (sometimes intentionally, more usually unintentionally) the efforts of governments to promote their countries on the international scene. There is, again, no generally accepted way of establishing soft power, but we can draw on a number of assessments to inform our analysis. Beyond cultural exports, Great Power reputations can be based on political values, institutional trust, and international legitimacy. For example, until recently

the United States drew great strength from its role as the defender of the ‘rules-based international order’.[22]

Reputation, or status, is often an end in itself for a Great Power. Having it does not necessarily make a people happy, but the perceived lack of Great Power status often makes elites, and the wider population, very unhappy, at least in those countries where such ambitions remain strong. Anger and humiliation, grounded in either historical or contemporary grievances, are strong drivers of Great Power politics. So are loyalty and honour. Does a power have a record of supporting allies, and is its assistance worth having? The domestic audience here is also vital. Does the principle for which the state stands in the world command support at home? The United States navigated a low point in the late 1960s and 1970s, when it was losing in Vietnam and beset by domestic turmoil, but it was able to retell its national narrative in a compelling way when President Ronald Reagan articulated a fresh vision of American greatness. The Soviet Union, by contrast, lost ideological legitimacy, and this played an important role in its collapse.[23]

The fourth criterion, *Resilience*, concerns how much pain a society and its economy can absorb over a long period of time. This builds on the qualities discussed above, but also goes beyond them. Historical performance plays an important role here. In the past, victory has not always gone to those who can inflict the most, but, sometimes, to those who can suffer the most. Past Great Powers, such as the Habsburg Empire, showed enormous staying power in adversity. Losing and recovering is as critical as winning. Successful and apparently invincible states can sometimes be astonishingly brittle when challenged—they are no more than shooting stars. The Great Powers don’t always win, but they always, as the historian Tim Blanning once said about the Habsburgs, have an army and an idea.[24]

The most resilient powers over time have been Britain and the United States—they have proved able to maintain long contests and to recover from serious defeats. Russia and the PRC, by contrast, are relatively young powers in their current form, and both have recent memory of political trauma and fragmentation. Like so much else, therefore, resilience is rooted in history, and especially in the development of social cohesion over time. It is, of course, difficult to measure resilience today, but we shall attempt to do

so by assessing the relative responses to military threats, terrorism, the global economic crisis, the COVID pandemic, and other challenges, all of which may indicate the extent to which societies and economies are able to satisfy the demands of Great Power status. A state may command extensive resources, and enjoy an impressive reach and reputation, and yet fall short as a Great Power if it lacks resilience.[25]

The extent to which the Great Powers command these four capabilities, and the balance between these capabilities, will vary considerably. No Great Power is configured quite like any other Great Power, and they differ considerably in capacity and vulnerabilities. In the past, none of the Great Powers were exactly as strong as any other, and some were considerably weaker than others—for example, eighteenth-century Prussia and late nineteenth-century Austria Hungary. Likewise, we will find that the Great Powers of today differ considerably from each other both in terms of individual strengths and overall strength.

The Great Powers are defined by both continuity and change. On the one hand, they are not ephemeral. A Great Power endures over time—it is no mere flash in the pan. On the other hand, the Great Powers are not static—they rise and fall. Usually, they will ‘rise’ slowly over time, such as in eighteenth-century Russia, or China today. Sometimes, as with Frederick the Great’s Prussia, a Great Power will burst onto the scene unexpectedly. Like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s bankruptcies, the Great Powers decline gradually and then fall suddenly. Three of the great empires which entered the First World War—Turkey, Austria Hungary, and Tsarist Russia—had ceased to exist by its end. We can therefore safely assume that while some of the Great Powers of today will retain their status over time, others may disappear with little notice. Great Powers look too big to fail until they do.

As we shall see, the rise and fall of the Great Powers has historically been driven by shifts in the global distribution of resources, reach, reputation, and resilience. If these shifts began as processes, they culminated in events. It was only when confrontation or conflict erupted that the new hierarchy became clear for all to see.

Most power transitions, but not all, have therefore involved the use of armed force. Usually, victory was a matter of attrition, but sometimes it was

a question of military or diplomatic skill. Very rarely, as in the case of Britain and the United States, the transition has been completely peaceful, partly because both powers made common cause against third parties, and partly because a shared torch was being passed from one to the other rather than seized. In some instances, such as the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the ostensible cause was domestic collapse, but this was brought on by the pressures of the superpower conflict.

It is true that, as the distinguished British international relations scholar Sir Lawrence Freedman writes, the advent of nuclear weapons made Great Power war too costly to contemplate. Today, however, with the Russian nuclear threats over Ukraine, it is clear that just because such a conflict is unthinkable does not mean that it is impossible. War or the threat of war has been, and remains, central to the relationship between the Great Powers, and thus critical to all our futures.[26]

Two

The Emergence of the Great Powers

THE MODERN GREAT Power system emerged from the disintegration of two colossal and chronologically distinct ordering systems in Eurasia. Both understood themselves as universalizing world empire projects. In the west the Roman Empire and its successor states spanned most of present-day Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. In the east the Chinggisid Empire of Genghis Khan and his successors embraced most of present-day European Russia, Iran, Central Asia, and the People's Republic of China. But if the eastern successor states remained vast empires dominating their entire regions, the western polities developed a system based on a balance of the local Great Powers. Attempts by Spain, France, and Germany to dominate Europe were contained in a series of conflicts spanning the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries. In time, extra-European actors, such as the United States and Imperial Japan, joined the ranks of the Great Powers, and the system became a truly global one. In the mid-twentieth century, the clash of the Great Powers culminated in the cataclysm of the Second World War, then continued in different form during the Cold War, before apparently petering out with the fall of the Berlin Wall.[1]

On the eve of the modern age in the late fifteenth century, the world featured about a dozen major actors. Going from west to east, there was the Aztec Empire in part of today's Mexico and that of the Incas in today's Peru, both sophisticated, wealthy, tribute-gathering, and (for their time and place) well-armed polities. In Europe, there was England, France, and the newly united Spain. In Eurasia, there was the rapidly expanding Ottoman Empire, which covered much of present-day Turkey, Bulgaria, and northern

Greece; the Turco-Mongol Empire of the Timurids, covering eastern Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and much of Central Asia; and the Ming dynasty in eastern and southern China. Muscovy, which had just cast off the overlordship of the Mongol ‘Golden Horde’, and Japan, which was still paying tribute to Ming China, were not yet major actors. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, which lay at the heart of Europe, was too divided to be a coherent force on the international stage. There were no comparable power centres in India, in sub-Saharan Africa, or in Australasia.

The connections between these powers should not be exaggerated. To be sure, the Silk Road linked China and Central Asia with Europe, but the geopolitical relationship between the two continents was tenuous. Moreover, large swathes of the world were simply unaware of each other. The Europeans had yet to discover the Americas for themselves. The Aztecs and Incas, in turn, had no idea that Eurasia existed. Ming China, which had recently reached out into the Indian Ocean as far as East Africa, was turning inwards. Each power dominated its immediate surroundings and—for example, in the case of the Ottomans and the Timurids—clashed with nearby powers, but there was no global ‘Great Power System’.

Instead, for much of the next two hundred years, the world would be dominated by the ‘Great Houses’. In western and southern Europe, it was the Habsburg dynasty, which by the mid-sixteenth century, under Emperor Charles V, spanned present-day Spain, the Low Countries, Austria, Hungary, much of Italy, and large parts of the Americas. In eastern Europe, the Romanovs came to the Russian throne in the early seventeenth century. In Turkey, the Ottomans continued to rule. In Persia, the Safavid Empire burst on the scene under Shah Ismail at the start of the century. Not long after, the Mughals swept down from Central Asia to displace the Delhi sultanate. In China, the Ming were succeeded by the Manchu Qing dynasty in the mid-seventeenth century.[2]

These empires grew at an impressive clip. Under Suleiman the Magnificent and his successors, the Ottoman Empire surged into North Africa, the Mediterranean, and south-eastern Europe. The Habsburgs rallied to confront them, turning the Turks back at Vienna in the late seventeenth century (with Polish help). Imperial Russia expanded in all directions, reaching the Caspian Sea by 1556 and the Pacific Coast by 1639. To the

south, the Safavid Empire quickly swelled to include parts of eastern Turkey, Iraq, and western Afghanistan. In India, the Mughals took over the entire subcontinent, creating an empire that stretched from Afghanistan to the Bay of Bengal. The Qing dynasty expanded into Taiwan, Outer Mongolia, and Central Asia, including Xinjiang.

In the mid-sixteenth century, Japan overcame its feudal anarchy, cast off tributary status, and entered the lists as a major contender in East Asia. The imperial regent Toyotomi Hideyoshi sought to establish a Japan-centric order in the region. In 1592, he attacked Korea, a direct challenge to China, signalling that he intended to move on to deal with the Ming. This provoked a Chinese intervention at Korea's request. Chinese troops withdrew once the situation had been resolved, a good example of the tributary system in action. Like Ming China, Japan was highly suspicious and contemptuous of the outside world. Foreigners, mainly Portuguese and Dutch, were briefly admitted in the late sixteenth century, but expelled by the middle of the seventeenth.

Underpinning each of these achievements was a formidable resource base and extractive system. In an age when power was often determined by headcount, demography mattered. The Habsburgs could draw not only on a large population but also on revenues from their American colonies and prosperous parts of Europe, such as the Low Countries and Northern Italy. Populous Ottoman Turkey was a society highly organised for war. Russia could mobilise a vast and biddable peasantry. The Mughals not only commanded an enormous demographic reservoir but had an extractive system superior to any immediate neighbour. The same was long true of China as well.

Most of these empires were land rather than naval powers. Only Holland, Portugal, and England were much stronger at sea than on land. Russia, long largely landlocked, with the exception of the frequently ice-bound port at Murmansk, could not field a serious fleet until much later, in the eighteenth century. Neither the Safavids nor the Mughals had much of a navy to boast of, which is why their penetration of the Indian Ocean was cultural and commercial rather than military. The Ottomans and the Chinese, who had once boasted powerful navies, had largely lost their sea legs by 1700. The Habsburgs were unusual in being formidable on both

land and sea and were thus the closest thing to a global power at this time. All the rest lacked the necessary reach.

Given these limitations, it is perhaps paradoxical that the major empires, east and west, saw themselves as ‘universal’ monarchies and claimed overlordship of the known world; this had been the default position going back to antiquity. In the Western Hemisphere, the Aztecs saw themselves as a universal empire. The Habsburgs, for whom the ‘world was not enough’, stressed their descent from the Roman Empire. In the east, the Safavids, Mughals, and Ming and Qing dynasties all claimed descent in one way or another from Genghis Khan, whose very name suggested universality and omnipotence. Imperial Japan saw the ‘world beneath one roof’, and the emperor, the *tenno*, was the ‘heavenly sovereign’. The Ottomans and Russians, as befitted polities which straddled west and east, claimed both the Roman and the Chinggisid imperial inheritances. Whether monarchs called themselves ‘World Conqueror’, ‘Universal Ruler’, or some similar honorific, the universalizing ambition was common to all.[3]

All of these empires stood for a wider principle. Each had its distinct reputation, governing ideology, and civilising mission. The Habsburgs styled themselves the defenders of Christendom and avatars of Counter-Reformation Catholicism. Following tradition, Romanov Russia styled itself the ‘Third Rome’ (after Rome itself and the Eastern Roman Empire of Byzantium). The Ottomans were militant promoters of Sunni Islam, at least from the mid-sixteenth century, when competition with the Safavids pushed them in that direction. Safavid Persia contrasted its civility and urban culture with the supposed barbarism of its nomadic rivals. Both Ming China, at least from the late fifteenth century onwards, and their Qing successors represented Confucianism, which was governing method, civilising mission, and world view all in one, though not intended for export beyond the empire. The task of the emperor was the maintenance of harmony, both politically and cosmically. Even the Mongols, who did not seek to impose their world view on subdued populations, regarded their conquests as a contribution to world ‘peace’.

The major actors, east and west, were also characterised by their remarkable resilience. They showed themselves able to bounce back from adversity, whether it was the Ottomans after the naval defeat at Lepanto in

1571, at the hands of a Habsburg-led coalition; the Spanish Habsburgs after the failure of the armada it sent against England in 1588; Russia after the Polish invasion and the ‘Time of Troubles’ from 1598 to 1613; the French after their devastating Wars of Religion, which only ended in the early seventeenth century; England after its mid-seventeenth-century Civil War; or the Mughals during their long struggle to secure the Indian subcontinent. Qing China overcame serious peasant revolts. In each case, it was not the capacity to secure victory which was distinctive, but the ability to recover from defeat or division.

By the end of the seventeenth century, Europe had acquired the outlines of a Great Power system. The Austrian and Spanish Habsburgs, who constituted a vast conglomerate spanning much of western and southern Europe and huge parts of the Americas under Emperor Charles V, battled the French and periodically the English for supremacy. In the east, the Commonwealth of Poland-Lithuania waxed and then waned, Brandenburg-Prussia and Russia grew steadily, and Sweden emerged like a shooting star and burned out. England and the Dutch Republic, the ‘maritime powers’, emerged as naval and commercial powerhouses. The Ottoman Empire made periodic attempts to invade Europe until defeat before the walls of Vienna in 1683, which marked the start of its long decline as ‘the sick man of Europe’. Ideology—the clash between Protestants and Catholics, between Christians and Muslims, and between representative and absolutist systems—played an important role, but the principal driver of geopolitics was state interest.

Throughout this period, the preponderance of global power was to be found in Asia. The Mughal Empire contained 150 million people, twice that of the whole of Europe. In the early seventeenth century, its ruler enjoyed an income twenty-five times larger than that of King James I of England. At its height, the Manchu Empire contained about 35 percent of the world’s population and an economy much larger than any European one. All this without reckoning the Ottomans and Safavids. It was thus by no means clear in 1700 that the modern Great Power system would come to be so heavily dominated by the West; indeed, the major eastern empires were still expanding at that point.[4]

It would be wrong, though, to speak of a geopolitical dominance of the East over the West. Despite growing commercial and cultural exchanges, the Western Great Power system and the Eastern empires interlocked spasmodically during this period. The strategic connection was closest where there was geographic contiguity on land. In 1689, Russia and China deconflicted at the Treaty of Nerchinsk, a settlement which held for around two hundred years, and Russia remained largely focused on Europe, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Ottoman Turkey and the Habsburgs, by contrast, clashed violently, and the latter sought to 'leapfrog' their enemy by getting the Safavids to threaten the Ottoman eastern flank.

The larger Mughal and Manchu Empires, which might have done serious damage to European armies on land, were simply too far away. Western powers might increasingly dominate the eastern sea-lanes, but they lacked the manpower to advance much inland. The only major territorial shift was Spain's seizure of the Philippines, which had only a tenuous political connection to the Ming tributary system. There was an isolated, and aborted, Spanish scheme for an attack on China—the 'Enterprise of China'—which envisaged the subjugation of that country on Aztec or Inca lines. So far as we know, with the significant exception of the Ottomans, there were no plans among the Eastern empires to embark on conquest in Europe, nor were the Western powers fearful of any such attack.

The difference between East and West lay elsewhere. In Europe, the spectre of Habsburg and later French 'Universal Monarchy' produced a reaction among the other powers. England, the Dutch Republic, and various German princes rallied to defend the European balance against the hegemon. In 1648, the Treaty of Westphalia established a system of power-sharing in Germany under Great Power guarantee rather than Habsburg imperial dominance. In 1713, the Treaty of Utrecht, which brought to an end the last of the great Wars of Grand Alliance against the French under King Louis XIV, specifically referenced the desire to avoid the hegemony of a single power. The parties committed themselves to 'the peace and tranquility of the Christian world through a just equilibrium of power (which is the best and most secure foundation of mutual friendship and lasting agreement in every quarter)'.[5]

In Eurasia, there was no comparable Great Power system, either regionally or continentally. To be sure, the Ottomans fought the Safavids, who in turn fought the Mughals. The resulting triangular relationship was well understood by the protagonists. Farther east, China and Japan clashed, mainly over Korea, and that triangle was also a staple of contemporary thinking. But thanks to the Himalayas and to the resistance of intervening polities, there was no direct geographic connection between the two strongest actors, China and the Mughals. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Eurasians themselves did not regard their region as a geopolitical whole.

Indeed, the very idea of a Great Power system was alien to key actors in Asia. China saw the world through the Sino-centric *tianxia* system, by which the emperor ruled over 'all under heaven'. As far as the Chinese were concerned, there could be no Great Power other than China. Foreigners were considered 'barbarians', and states on the periphery, such as Vietnam and Korea, had to recognise Chinese suzerainty, a status which allowed them self-government but was well short of sovereignty in the modern sense. They were expected to pay tribute, and the succession of their monarchs was formally confirmed by the Chinese court. In return, these states were granted commercial privileges and military protection.[6]

Many of these countries voluntarily adopted Chinese values and culture. Neo-Confucianism, Chinese administrative models, and the Chinese classical language and literature influenced Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, suggesting that Chinese soft power had a greater reach than the emperor's military might. Besides, the tributary states may have understood their payments as the price of conducting trade rather than as a symbol of submission; some scholars regard the 'system' more as an array of practices that evolved over time. Moreover, in practice the emperor dealt with Russia as a peer when negotiating the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. One way or the other, though, Chinese universalism, however unbounded in theory, for now had little impact on the world beyond the tributary system.[7]

The emergence of a Great Power system helps to explain why Europeans went in search of new worlds to conquer. This phenomenon was partly driven by greed, missionary zeal, and contempt of the 'other', to be sure, but the principal motivation from the state's perspective was to gain resources, prestige, or some other leverage overseas which could be

deployed for geopolitical advantage in Europe, and to deny these to rival states. One of the purposes of the Portuguese explorations around the Cape of Good Hope and Columbus's voyages to America was to attack the Ottomans from the rear and to secure resources for a new crusade against them. Latin American silver funded Spanish armies in the Low Countries and Germany, which in turn inspired Dutch, French, and English imperial counter-projects. Sometimes, as in the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494), in which Portugal and Spain carved up the colonial pie between themselves, the European powers settled matters amicably, but more often they did not.

In this world, naval and commercial power became increasingly important. No state could hope to dominate without it. Moreover, according to the prevailing mercantilist orthodoxy, commerce and prosperity were zero-sum games in which one side's gain was the other's loss. Trade and seapower became central to conceptions of Great Powerness, at least in Europe, where those states which could scrambled to build navies and to promote their own trade, whether through the Navigation Acts or other protectionist measures. 'Whoever commands the ocean', the English statesman and adventurer Walter Raleigh stated in the early seventeenth century, 'commands the trade of the world, and whoever commands the trade of the world, and whoever is master of that, commands the world itself.' As John Evelyn, an English diarist and official, wrote in 1674, 'To pretend to Universal Monarchy without Fleets was long since looked upon as a politick chimera.'[8]

In the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the world took a major step towards a global Great Power system. The great commercial and colonial power Britain, in alliance with Habsburg Austria, was now the principal guardian of the European balance of power against France and other challengers. The rise of Russia under Peter the Great and Prussia under Frederick the Great completed the 'pentarchy' by 1740. Despite three conflicts, culminating in the Seven Years' War, Prussia's rivals failed to cut Prussia back down to size, not least thanks to generous British subsidies. It was now widely understood that the five Great Powers—Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Russia—shaped the international politics of the continent, and that, though it was taken as a given that each

would try to maximise its own advantage, they could collectively maintain the balance of power.

This system was put heavily to the test after the French Revolution of 1789. The revolutionaries, and later Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, sought to bend the continent to their will. They very nearly succeeded, overrunning much of the continent, establishing satellite republics and kingdoms, and reducing mighty Prussia and Austria to vassal status, at least for a while. The Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, the ‘First Reich’, disintegrated under the onslaught. It took a mammoth effort and five coalitions to bring France to heel. In 1815, it was now four Great Powers—Britain, Russia, Austria, and Prussia—that dictated the peace terms at the Congress of Vienna.

If this system had a hegemon, it was Britain. Its power was now based not only on the reach of the Royal Navy and the financial power of the ‘City’ but also on the country’s manufacturing capacity, particularly in textiles and metals, developed during the Industrial Revolution, making Britain the ‘Workshop of the World’. Its global standing was underpinned by a massive programme of political and constitutional reform which was repugnant to some but a model for many. This model of state development would later be followed by Alexander Hamilton and other Federalists in the United States as both nations pursued rapid industrialisation behind protective tariffs. Over the next 150 years or so, possession of a manufacturing base which could sustain naval and military mobilisation became critical to Great Power status, and some would say it remains so.

Throughout the period, the importance of North America for the European balance grew steadily. British Prime Minister William Pitt famously remarked, towards the end of the Seven Years’ War, that ‘America had been conquered in Germany’. The American colonist John Adams looked forward to the moment when the ‘seat of [British] Empire’ would be on his side of the Atlantic, not in the Home Islands. If all this reflected an increasingly globalised European Great Power system—and it is true that Europeans and Asians were well aware of each other—it was still too early to speak of a global Great Power system, because the vast majority of Asia and Africa was not yet part of it.[9]

In fact, the number of large independent power centres in Eurasia was shrinking. The Ottomans were on the retreat on most fronts, especially in Europe, but remained a serious force. The Mughals ran out of steam following the death of the Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, suffering the sack of Delhi by the Persians in 1739. Not long after that, Persia's power peaked during the reigns of Nadir Shah and Ahmed Shah Durrani, but it was now under severe pressure from the Russians in the north, the Ottomans in the west, and, increasingly, the British in the Gulf. Meanwhile, the British insinuated themselves into India commercially and politically. Their main purpose, apart from resource extraction, was to keep rival European powers, especially the French, out. India now fragmented more and more into decentralized polities. It remained commercially very strong, but it ceased to be geopolitically coherent.[10]

North-east Asia, by contrast, still largely resisted both Western domination and inclusion in the global system. Manchu China was still expanding, mainly westwards. Qinghai was incorporated in 1724, Tibet in 1750, and Xinjiang in 1760. These were huge territorial gains comparable to anything that the European powers had secured during the same period. China vigilantly and effectively policed both its sea and land borders; with the exception of a tiny foothold in Macau, Europeans were rigidly excluded. One emperor stated baldly that 'China has no matters of common concern with the west', and in 1793, another—Qianlong—said, to a visiting British mission, 'I set no value on objects strange and ingenious and have no use for your country's manufactures.' At this point, China was still wealthier than Europe. Likewise, Japan prospered in geopolitical isolation—its capital city was twice the size of London in 1700—keeping not merely Western powers but the West more generally at arm's length.[11]

It was in the Western Hemisphere, though, that the most dramatic geopolitical shifts took place. In the mid-1770s, the North American colonists rose in revolt against Britain, eventually establishing a state designed to ensure its survival in a predatory European Great Power world. In the War of 1812, the United States failed to annex Canada and suffered the indignity of having its capital occupied by the British, but it did—in effect—force London to share control of the continent. About ten years later, US President James Monroe proclaimed his famous doctrine by which

America resolved to oppose any new European colonies in the Western Hemisphere.

In the early nineteenth century, the Spanish and Portuguese Empires in Latin America collapsed—Spain's was reduced to a few Caribbean possessions. Despite the best efforts of the charismatic rebel leader Simón Bolívar, there was no Latin American Union which could have played a Great Power role. The continent fragmented into successor states largely based on the old Spanish viceroyalties. Only the former Portuguese colony of Brazil became an empire and seemed capable of playing a larger role on the world stage. Brazil was widely suspected of imperial ambitions by the rest of South America, and the new states fought each other—for example, during the War of the Pacific (1879–1893) between Chile on the one side and Bolivia and Peru on the other. The real hegemony in the area, however, was exercised by Britain, which brokered Brazilian independence and whose navy kept out European predators and thus effectively enforced the Monroe Doctrine.

The Vienna Settlement, which emerged from the Congress of Vienna in 1815, established a Great Power cartel designed to suppress domestic revolutions and prevent interstate wars on the European continent. This 'Concert of Europe' soon expanded to include vanquished France, reconstituting the old 'pentarchy' of Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia. As the legendary British foreign secretary Lord Castlereagh put it, 'The great powers feel that they have not only a common interest, but a common duty to attend to.' They met routinely, at first in regular congresses and then in more ad hoc formats. The Great Powers did not always agree—Britain generally opposed interventions by conservative states against liberal movements—but they did achieve a remarkable degree of collaboration. For example, the Great Powers united in 1830 to ensure that the separation of Belgium from Holland was conducted in such a way as, to quote their 'declaration', not to jeopardise the 'just balance in Europe and the general peace'.[12]

In Asia, the number of major geopolitical actors continued to shrink. The British grew ever more dominant in India. After the rebellion of 1857 was suppressed, London deposed the Mughal emperor, long a puppet anyway,

and took over the direct running of the subcontinent from the East India Company. In China, the Manchus went into a precipitate decline, partly for internal reasons and partly under the pressure of European commercial interests. Britain forced China to acquiesce in the supply of narcotics from India through the ‘Opium War’ of 1839–1842. In 1853–1854, an American squadron forced the country to open up to the outside world. A few years after that, China was humiliated by an Anglo-French punitive expedition which burned the Summer Palace in Beijing.

In Africa, there were a number of major local actors, but none could be reckoned Great Powers. The Sokoto Caliphate, centred on present-day Nigeria, was the second largest slave society in the world in 1800 after the American South. It was progressively squeezed by British and French colonial expansion until it finally disappeared at the start of the twentieth century. The Egyptian Empire of Muhammed Ali Pasha was even bigger: It expanded throughout much of the nineteenth century and attempted to industrialise and overthrow its Ottoman overlords before it eventually came under British influence—and ultimately control—from the 1880s. How these societies would have developed in the absence of colonialism, and whether a distinct African state system would then have emerged and eventually interacted with the outside world, is unknowable.

Meanwhile, in the Western Hemisphere, two rival ordering systems faced off against each other. The British project was internationalist, free trading (after the repeal of the Corn Laws restricting the import of foreign grain in the 1840s), and anti-slavery, though it continued to rely on indentured labour in the colonies for some time, while America was largely trade protectionist, and included an expanding ‘slave interest’. In the United States, the question of slavery not only dominated domestic politics but was also inseparable from the issue of territorial expansion: The plantation owners of the South wanted any new territories to allow slave labour, while many in the North wanted, if not to abolish the practice completely, then to prevent it from spreading. Many also thought an Anglo-American conflict was inevitable.[13]

This did not happen, for two reasons. First, the Americans fought each other in a bloody civil war in which the slave-supporting Confederacy in the South was resoundingly defeated by the Union Army of the northern

states. Slavery ceased to be a significant geopolitical issue in North America. Second, the two ‘Anglo-Saxon’ powers, as they were increasingly termed, slowly turned from confrontation towards cooperation based on a common descent and world view. ‘I am convinced’, the former (and future) British Prime Minister Lord John Russell remarked in 1856, ‘that there are no two countries whose interest and duty it is more to cultivate friendly relations with each other. There is room for us both on the globe.’ ‘We have a great empire to rule and great duties to fulfil,’ he continued. ‘The United States are no doubt destined to great empire and to great duties and let us both use the power which God has given us for the benefit of the human race.’[14]

The big loser in all of this was France, which industrialised late and was left behind not only by Britain, but by Germany and the United States as well. It also felt left out of the distribution of spoils in the Western Hemisphere. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, Emperor Napoleon III tried to improve his country’s Great Power standing through an ambitious policy of intervention on both sides of the Atlantic. His hopes were dashed, however, when his candidate for the Mexican throne, the Habsburg Archduke Maximilian, fell foul of the Monroe Doctrine. The archduke was eventually captured and executed by his republican opponents. In Europe, Napoleon III scored some early successes in Italy but found himself outmanoeuvred by the Prussian Minister President Otto von Bismarck and ultimately defeated in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1871.[15]

It was also in Europe that the clash of Great Power ambitions began to place the system under pressure. Russia’s ambitions in the Balkans, the Near East, and Central Asia provoked a Franco-British balancing coalition which ended in defeat for Russia in the Crimean War, while Austria and Prussia looked on. In retaliation, the Tsarist Empire allowed the establishment of a unified Italy at Austria’s expense, and then stood aside when Otto von Bismarck united Germany, to the chagrin of France, in 1871. The pentarchy of Britain, France, Austria-Hungary (as it became after 1867), Russia, and Germany remained the main reference point even for relatively obscure disputes. For example, Bismarck remarked at the Congress of Berlin in 1878, summoned to settle Balkan issues, that the

Eastern Question ‘only interests Europe through its effect upon the relations of the great powers among themselves’. For the first time in modern history, there was now a single German Great Power at the heart of the continent. It required all of Bismarck’s skill at juggling the European balance, the ‘game of glass beads’, as he called it, to prevent conflict.[16]

In the Western Hemisphere, Anglo-American hegemony was now undisputed. Differences, such as those over Venezuela in the mid-1890s, were accommodated. Britain and America’s dominance was also beginning to extend to other parts of the globe, some time before there was any formal military alliance. Over time, this would result in a power transition from Britain to the United States, but for a long period it would be more accurate to speak of an Anglo-American understanding. In the course of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this informal ‘Anglo-Saxon’ condominium grew ever stronger. Between them, the British and the Americans controlled a large proportion of the world’s surface area, communications, commerce, credit, and resources either directly or indirectly.

Perhaps surprisingly, the initial challenges to this hegemony did not come from Africa, which was now almost completely colonised, or Asia, where Japan underwent a meteoric revival after the Meiji Restoration of 1868. Japan industrialised, built a powerful army and navy, and soon began to assert itself in North-East Asia. Japan’s main aim was to dislodge the Qing dynasty from its centuries-old hegemony in the region, but it also sought to contain the growing Russian presence, leading to a three-sided struggle centred on Manchuria and Korea. In 1894–1895, Japan defeated China and annexed Taiwan. Then, to general astonishment, it launched a surprise attack on Tsarist Russia, a European power, in 1904, beating it on land and at sea. Not long after, Japan annexed Korea. But this ascent was not—yet—understood as a threat to the Great Power order, or to ‘Anglo-Saxon’ hegemony. Japan’s first alliance, in 1902, was with Britain. Moreover, the Japanese victory over Russia was welcomed by US President Theodore Roosevelt as the triumph of constitutional monarchy over tsarist despotism. To many non-Europeans, the rise of Japan was a victory over whites, but as far as the Great Power system was concerned it had, for now, simply acquired a new member.[17]

Instead, the initial challenges to Anglo-American hegemony came from within Europe—first, from Imperial Germany, a Great Power which had arrived late at the table. After the resignation of Bismarck in 1890, those who believed that Germany had been left out of the global distribution of territory and resources became more vocal. Their ambitions, the failure to maintain relations with Russia, and the construction of a large navy to impress the 'Anglo-Saxons' eventually provoked a balancing coalition of Britain, France, and Russia under the Triple Entente. In Central Europe, Germany and Austria huddled together as the 'Central Powers'. All this was accompanied by such a deepening of economic links between states that the writer and politician Norman Angell famously predicted that war between the Great Powers had become impossible. Eventually, though, the escalating geopolitical tensions—and a large dose of miscommunication—led to armed conflict in 1914, despite the huge financial costs it imposed on global capitalism.[18]

The First World War was the first Great Power conflict in more than forty years, and the first involving all of the European Great Powers for a century. It pitted the Entente and Italy on one side against the Central Powers and the Ottoman Empire on the other. The United States initially remained neutral, though leaning heavily to the Allied side through the supply of credit and war materiel. Then Germany's introduction of unrestricted submarine warfare brought America into the war in 1917, and —together with the British blockade and mounting domestic unrest—this sealed the downfall of the Reich by 1918. Germany's fate was decided at the Paris Peace Conference a year later.

The second challenge came in the shape of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, which initially rejected not only the Great Power system but the whole international capitalist order. The young Soviet Union overcame an existential challenge from the 'Whites' during the Civil War, saw off an intervention by Britain, France, the United States, and Japan, and repelled a Polish invasion. Over the next eighty years or so, it represented the principle of world communism and enjoyed global reach, partly through its ideological attractiveness to many and partly thanks to the activities of the Communist International, the Comintern.

It took several years (1919–1923) for the postwar settlements to be concluded. These were primarily designed to contain both sets of challengers, partly through territorial redistribution and partly through the establishment of a new international architecture. Germany was disarmed; lost lands to France, Denmark, Poland, and Belgium; subjected to temporary occupation in the West; and hit with a hefty reparations bill. The Tsarist Empire had disintegrated, and its Soviet successor state gave up Finland, the Baltic states, and large parts of Belarus and Western Ukraine. The Habsburg Empire was carved into a slew of smaller countries, many of them with large minorities, while the Ottoman Empire was reduced to its Turkish core. In Asia, Japan swept up Germany's colonies, greatly strengthening its position in the Pacific.[19]

These arrangements were embedded in a new scheme of global governance: the League of Nations and the mandate system. The intent was to leave behind the traditional Great Power system, which was deemed to have led to catastrophic war. The new scheme was supposed to herald a new era of internationalism. Despite the aspiration for a fresh start, though, the result was largely a cartel of the Great Power victors. The dominant Council of the League of Nations had four permanent members: Britain, France, Italy, and Japan. Germany and the Soviet Union were initially excluded from the League altogether. German colonies and large parts of the former Ottoman Empire were turned into international 'mandates' under the tutelage of the British and the French. The legitimacy of the League suffered, though, not only from the absence of the colonised peoples and the European vanquished, but also from that of an increasingly isolationist United States, which refused to join.

It was only after the First World War that Japan joined the ranks of the challengers. Its attempt to have the principle of 'racial equality' adopted, meaning the right not to be categorised with other Asians (especially the Chinese) for immigration purposes, and to establish an empire on the same basis as the Western powers, was rejected at the Versailles peace conference. Japan was also forced to accept an inferior naval status to Britain and the United States. Italy felt aggrieved because it was denied some of its territorial claims as a victor power. Germany and the Soviet

Union, the biggest losers at Versailles, were also deeply alienated from the international order.

In an age when access to territory and resources was regarded as the key to global status, these powers—especially Germany, Italy, and Japan—were known as the ‘have-nots’. For example, the German dictator Adolf Hitler repeatedly referred to the Reich, Mussolini’s Italy, and Imperial Japan as the ‘have-nots’ who were trying to wrest a more just international order from the greedy ‘haves’—that is, the British Empire, the United States, the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, and also France. Although the three powers never became a truly cohesive bloc, during the late 1930s and early 1940s the ‘have-nots’ moved closer together through a series of pacts culminating in the establishment of the German-Italian-Japanese ‘Axis’. Their aim was to secure the resources and living space necessary to balance the Anglo-Americans. Nazi Germany sought *Lebensraum* in the east; Italy, *Spazio Vitale* in Africa and the Mediterranean; and Japan, a ‘Co-Prosperity Sphere’ in Asia.[20]

The Anglo-Americans, though, had no intention of accommodating the challengers. To be sure, there were many in Britain who wanted to ‘appease’ the dictators, and many ‘isolationists’ in the United States who wanted to leave Europe to its fate. But the mainstream was not just repelled by Nazism, particularly, but also convinced that the democratic world could not co-exist with dictatorship. US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt announced in October 1937 that the three challengers should be put in some form of international ‘quarantine’. As Henry Luce, the legendary founder of *Time* magazine, observed, freedom required a much bigger living space than tyranny.[21]

In the face of this common front, and fearful that time was running short, Germany, Italy, and Japan, one after the other, confronted the Anglo-Americans. Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, resulting in a declaration of war against him by Britain and France. In 1940, the German leader overran Norway, Denmark, the Low Countries, and France, though he failed to subdue Britain. In the following year, Hitler occupied much of the Balkans and sent troops to North Africa to support his Italian allies there. The United States, once again, was initially neutral but supplied Britain with substantial military aid from the start. Meanwhile, Japan

moved into large parts of China and Indochina, provoking British and American opposition, including through the imposition of a crippling oil embargo, but as yet not pursuing open military conflict.

German attempts to secure the collaboration of the Soviet Union produced the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Hitler and Stalin in August 1939, though not an active military alliance against Britain. In June 1941, the German dictator launched an attack on the Soviet Union that was partly driven by racial and ideological animosity, but mainly designed to secure the resources to balance the ‘Anglo-Saxons’. In December 1941, Japan attacked the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor, and a few days later Hitler declared war on the United States.[22]

After initial successes, during which the Nazis overran much of continental Europe and the Japanese large swathes of South-East Asia, the Axis powers were defeated by the Allied coalition in 1945. This was led by the ‘Big Three’—the ‘Grand Alliance’ of the British Empire, the United States, and the Soviet Union—but included China and, by the end, many other states. Germany was overrun, its cities pulverised by Anglo-American bombing, and its eastern half ploughed over by the Red Army; Japan surrendered after the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The resulting peace settlement saw the dismemberment of the three Axis empires and the establishment of a new system of global governance in the form of the United Nations. Like the League of Nations, this was both a new beginning and a traditional mechanism of Great Power management. The creators of the United Nations recognised that the League had failed because of the lack of proper enforcement mechanisms, which were in turn the result of insufficient Great Power engagement, primarily by the United States but also by the Soviet Union. They wanted to reconcile Great Power interests with the demand of middling and smaller actors for sovereign equality. One of those closely involved in drawing up the UN Charter later remarked that the United Nations was ‘an alliance of the Great Powers embedded in a universal organization’.[23]

In the end, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) had five veto-bearing permanent members: the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet

Union, and China. This decision largely reflected the power realities in 1945, with the exception of France, which was resurrected by the Anglo-Americans. Germany was partitioned; Japan disarmed. The UN Charter specified that the non-permanent members of the council were to be elected taking ‘geographic representation’ into account. The UNSC was primarily designed to reflect power, not diversity.

The postwar international economic architecture also reflected the predominance of the Great Powers, especially the United States. The structures agreed at Bretton Woods in 1944 aimed to create a stable and cooperative financial framework for global trade and economic recovery, thus preventing another Great Depression. The system was based on fixed exchange rates, with the US dollar pegged to gold, and other currencies pegged to the dollar. Its instruments were the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which was tasked with ensuring exchange-rate stability and acted as a lender of last resort to governments, and the various institutions which later made up the World Bank, which were supposed to reduce global tension by reducing poverty. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), later to become the World Trade Organization, was designed to reduce trade barriers and increase international trade.[24]

It took several years for the postwar settlement to bed down. In Europe, there was a period of uncertainty before the Soviet Union crushed various partisan movements in Ukraine and the Baltic states and established satellite governments in Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and finally the German Democratic Republic. The United Kingdom worked with US President Harry Truman to establish the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance designed to deter Stalin from attacking democratic Europe, in 1949. Six years later, the western part of Germany—the Federal Republic—joined NATO, prompting the Soviet Union to corral its satellite states under the rival Warsaw Pact.

In East Asia, Mao Zedong’s communists won a civil war over Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists in China in 1949. Japan, meanwhile, went on to become a successful democracy and experienced phenomenal economic growth, but remained a military dwarf on account of its restrictive constitution. In Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia, the process of decolonisation substantially changed the international landscape as the

European empires—British, French, Belgian, Dutch, and Portuguese—were largely wound up by the mid-1970s.

The geopolitical implications of these shifts were considerable. In Europe, Germany was almost completely eclipsed, and Britain and France, both already weakened by the cost of war, also suffered from the loss of their colonial possessions. By the late 1940s, Britain was openly acknowledging the transition of power to the United States by calling upon it to take over the burden of defending the Eastern Mediterranean against communist infiltration. In 1956, the dominance of the United States was amply demonstrated when Britain and France were forced by Washington to withdraw from the Suez Canal, which they had occupied to prevent Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser from nationalising it. The French responded by throwing themselves into the new European Economic Community (EEC)—established by the Treaty of Rome in 1957—with Germany and four other states. The British kept aloof at first, playing a leading role in establishing an alternative European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and maintaining their preferential relationships with the Commonwealth. After fifteen years, though, they abandoned their kith and kin to join the EEC.

In Asia, the newly independent Indian colossus had the potential to become a Great Power. Most importantly, Mao's victory established the People's Republic of China as a major factor on the world stage. Washington long refused to recognise the communist government in Beijing, leading to the anomaly that the Chinese seat at the UNSC was still held by the much weaker regime of Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan for many years. Mao soon demonstrated the PRC's strength by intervening on the side of North Korea and against the United States in the Korean War, forcing Washington into a compromise settlement. The Western moment in Asia had turned out to be quite brief, at least in historical perspective.

There was no comparable return, or emergence, of a Great Power on the African continent. Before World War II, the African American writer W. E. B. Du Bois had called for 'the rise of a great Black African state' based on racial equality. After decolonisation, the leader of Gold Coast, Kwame Nkrumah, took up the mantle of Pan-Africanism. But his hopes for a United States of Africa collapsed when he was toppled in 1966. Plans for an East African Federation also came to nothing, and so did various ideas of

creating a completely new post-imperial world order. Instead of supporting continental union, or other utopias, African states in practice sought to create a more equal world through their recognition as European-style sovereign states. The reality, though, was a patchwork of countries which struggled to build state capacity and were neither individually nor collectively capable of attaining Great Power status. In fact, the most significant local power–political actor was the white-minority apartheid regime in South Africa. Though South Africa had acquired a few nuclear weapons by the 1980s, they were dismantled after the onset of majority rule in the 1990s. For the rest, the old colonial powers retained considerable influence—especially France, which compensated for its retreat in other parts of the globe by clinging grimly to its control of *Francafrique*.[25]

In part, the Cold War was an ideological struggle. It pitted the capitalist democracies of the West, and their authoritarian allies across the world, against the communist Soviet Union and the satellite states of the Warsaw Pact, the People's Republic of China, North Korea, and their authoritarian partners in other parts of the globe. These divides were somewhat fluid, though: Communist Yugoslavia was non-aligned, China split from the Soviet Union, and Egypt switched sides, while the United States later pursued détente with both the Soviet Union and Mao's China.

The Cold War was also a classic Great Power contest that meshed with other rivalries and drew in new actors. The Soviet Union, for example, operated according to a 'Revolutionary-Imperial paradigm' blending a communist world view and traditional tsarist geopolitics. Moscow sought not only to promote communism but also to pursue old tsarist ambitions in Europe, the Black Sea, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Soviet Russia's clash with Mao's China, which led to fighting on the Ussuri River in 1969, partly reflected ideological differences, but was also the result of Great Power rivalries. The Sino-Soviet split turned the Great Power balance from a bipolar into a tripolar system.

The Cold War profoundly shaped the history of the world after 1945—for example, through the nuclear arms race, the war between the US-led UN coalition and PRC-backed North Korea, the war between the United States and North Vietnam, and the constant search by both superpowers for local 'proxies' in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. Of course, many of

the actors were pursuing their own largely unrelated agenda. Decolonisation brought new powers to the fore, and many of them refused to take sides between Washington and Moscow, and came together at the Bandung Conference in 1955 to form the ‘non-aligned movement’. Formerly Dutch Indonesia pursued a highly activist policy in the 1950s and 1960s until a brutal coup brought it firmly into the anti-communist camp. By contrast, India became very wary of the PRC after being attacked by Mao in 1962 but kept close military links to the Soviet Union.[26]

The only major parts of the world and universe which escaped the Cold War and the Great Power struggle were outer space and the Antarctic. In 1959, the Antarctic Treaty declared the area off limits for military deployments and resource extraction. It was also agreed not to militarise space. In both cases cooperation was supposed to replace competition. Despite a number of close shaves—notably during the Berlin crisis in 1958–1961, the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, and the ‘Able Archer’ exercise in 1983, when a NATO nuclear exercise startled the Soviet Union so much that its countermeasures nearly kicked off a spiral of deadly escalation—the Great Powers were able to avoid direct confrontation, and thus nuclear Armageddon, after the Korean War.

The Cold War raged for more than forty years, and the superpower struggle ebbed and flowed. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Soviet Bloc seemed in the ascendant. The USSR gained at least nuclear parity with the Americans, while around the same time, the United States emerged from the Vietnam War badly weakened. The Bretton Woods system collapsed. Japan and West Germany experienced such explosive economic growth that some began to predict their imminent return to Great Power status.[27]

US President Richard Nixon sought to mitigate these setbacks as best he could. In 1971, he managed to triangulate by ‘opening’ to the PRC. He visited Beijing in 1972, completing the shift from bipolarity to tripolarity at the global level that had begun with the Sino-Soviet rift of the previous decade. Nixon also began a process of détente with the Soviet Union, concluding nuclear arms agreements (in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, or SALT I) that formally acknowledged Moscow’s equality in this respect. In the Helsinki Accords of 1975, his successor, Gerald Ford, conceded Western recognition of the Soviet Union’s borders and those of its

communist satellites in Europe in return for a Soviet and Warsaw Pact pledge to observe certain human rights. As the decade drew to a close, Washington's position deteriorated further, with anti-American revolutions in Nicaragua and Iran.

In 1979 the Soviet Union overreached by invading Afghanistan. During the subsequent decade, Moscow was worn down by the economic and military costs of the Cold War, outspent by a resurgent United States under President Ronald Reagan, and undermined by mounting resistance to repression in the satellite states. Few paid much attention, geopolitically, to the PRC, which joined the World Bank and the IMF in 1980 and applied to join the GATT six years later. In 1985, the new Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, embarked on a programme of radical domestic economic and political reform that was designed to prop up his country's Great Power position but eventually unleashed disintegrative forces he could not control. The Soviet Union buried the hatchet with Beijing in East Asia and in 1989 finally cut its losses in Afghanistan. In the summer of 1989, the midlevel US State Department official Francis Fukuyama, writing in the *National Interest* magazine, proclaimed the 'end of history' as communist rule collapsed in quick succession in different countries across the Eastern Bloc, starting in Poland. The Chinese Communist Party avoided a similar fate through a brutal crackdown on protesters on Tiananmen Square. The Berlin Wall fell in November 1989. In October 1990, Germany was reunited. The Cold War was over, and with it, apparently, the threat of Great Power rivalry and conflict.[28]

Reviewing this gallop through the five hundred years of Great Power conflict from 1490 to 1990, one is struck by the continuity as much as the change. Great Powers have come and gone, some for good. The Habsburgs, for example, are very unlikely to rise again. That said, many of the actors have remained remarkably consistent over time: England-Britain, France, Russia, India and China (with intervals), and Japan were already important in the late fifteenth century. Three of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, Britain, France, and Russia, were already Great Powers in the eighteenth century, and China may justly be termed one until that point, before being plunged into its 'century of humiliation'.

As we have seen, the Great Powers came in various shapes and sizes. They were never equally powerful or even of roughly comparable strength. The powers also differed widely in terms of their resources, reach, reputation, and resilience. To give but a few examples, Britain was often lacking in land power, Prussia had no navy to speak of, and the Soviet Union was economically weak. They were, nonetheless, all Great Powers in their time.

Despite the presence of Great Powers across Eurasia, the Indian Ocean, and North Africa going back hundreds of years, the Great Power system began in Europe and then expanded slowly around the world. The milestones of that story are not global, at least to begin with. The mid-seventeenth-century Treaty of Westphalia, which brought the Thirty Years' War to an end, did not even pacify the whole of Europe (it didn't usher in the sovereign nation-state either, despite the claims of generations of international relations scholars). The eighteenth-century Treaties of Utrecht, Aix-la-Chapelle, and Hubertusburg, by contrast, all had substantial colonial dimensions. So did the Treaty of Vienna. The Treaty of Versailles and the Potsdam Declaration, the two settlements which ended the world wars, were of course, very much global in scope.

During this period, it became widely accepted that Great Power status could not be claimed on a purely European basis. The quest for the necessary demographic, economic, and raw material resources required a much more ambitious approach. Only the establishment of global empires or 'Great Spaces', it was thought, would provide the required critical mass. This is why the newly united Germany, a European colossus, felt 'small' on the world stage in the late nineteenth century. Some, such as Adolf Hitler, disputed this view, but his argument that Germany should eschew overseas expansion in favour of vast continental European empire to balance the Anglo-Americans was in itself a recognition that he was operating in a 'global' environment.

It is often said that the Great Power system was inherently racist and underpinned what W. E. B. Du Bois called the 'global colour line'. It is certainly true that slavery was enabled by the Great Powers until the nineteenth century. It is also the case that European imperialism increasingly rested on racial premises, and that by the late nineteenth century most of the Great Powers were white. That said, it was the Great

Powers, especially the British Empire, that also ended the international slave trade, in the face of furious opposition in Africa, South America, and Asia. Moreover, Japan was welcomed into the system, formed an alliance with Britain, fought on the winning side in the First World War, and was one of five permanent members of the Council of the League of Nations.[29]

Despite the undoubted importance of economic factors, experience showed that resources alone were rarely decisive. There were many richer states than Prussia and Russia in the eighteenth century, but few as powerful. The United States was the world's largest economy by 1916, but only became its strongest power some time later. After 1945, Germany and Japan became economic superpowers but remained militarily stunted. The PRC was economically weak in the 1960s and 1970s, with a GDP smaller than Canada's when Nixon went to Beijing, but nevertheless it was widely regarded as one of the poles in a tripolar world.[30]

Besides, what mattered was the ability to mobilise resources, not just in peacetime but in times of conflict. Spanish new world silver could be cut off by Dutch and English fleets. Napoleon's Continental System was disconnected from Asia and America by the Royal Navy. Thanks to the British blockade one of the richest countries in the world, Wilhelmine Germany, suffered serious food shortages during the First World War. Likewise, cut off from world markets and raw materials, Hitler's New Order in Europe was economically much weaker than an audit of its prewar productive capacity would have suggested. This is why the military, economic, and financial reach of the Anglo-Americans in recent centuries has proved so important. Assessing Great Power potential, in short, has never been about simply adding up peacetime GDP. The higher the degree of economic interdependence, the greater the vulnerability. In the Cold War, Western economic statecraft had limited purchase on the communist economies of the Soviet Bloc and the PRC.

The Great Powers had been a permanent fixture for hundreds of years, but the way in which the Cold War ended in 1989 suggested the dawn of a new era. Just as the beginning of the twentieth century had seen the start of a peaceful power transition from Britain to the United States, so did the almost bloodless collapse of the Soviet Union at its close seem to portend the end of traditional Great Power politics.

Three

The Eclipse of the Great Powers

THE YEARS FOLLOWING the fall of the Berlin Wall saw dramatic developments in Great Power politics. The Soviet Union disintegrated, with the Russian Federation emerging as the designated successor state. By contrast, the People's Republic of China navigated the fallout from Tiananmen Square and continued its economic opening to the West. The freshly renamed European Union articulated its aspiration to play a global role ever more confidently. Britain, and to a lesser extent France, remained key actors. Although Germany grew in significance after reunification, the country remained fundamentally constrained on the world stage. Japan, which had increased in stature throughout the previous two decades, fell back as its economy stalled. Above all, the United States, which had been embattled for much of the Cold War, emerged as the uncontested global hegemon. To many, though, the end of the East-West confrontation and the simultaneous march of 'globalisation' suggested not the transformation of the Great Power system but its redundancy. They saw the falling of trade and travel barriers, and the surge in migration, as evidence of the retreat of the state more generally. Great Power rivalry and military peer competition seemed a thing of the past.

In the immediate aftermath of the fall of communism in Eastern Europe, the American and Soviet leaderships still hoped to maintain the collaboration they had begun in the late 1980s. For a brief moment in 1990–1991, President George H.W. Bush and General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev cooperated on all key issues. Germany was allowed to unite. Democratic elections were held across the old Warsaw Pact states. If Bush was sympathetic towards demands for independence in the Baltic states, he did

not encourage Ukraine to break away from the Soviet Union. Western Europeans still hoped to build a ‘Common European Home’ together with Gorbachev. Globally, the American-Soviet antagonism was over. When the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in the late summer of 1990, the Soviet Union, the West, and much of the rest of the world united in condemning him at the United Nations. A Great Power partnership between the United States and a liberalised Soviet Union seemed possible.[1]

Despite this, the collapse of Soviet power continued unabated. In early 1991, the Baltic Republics became restive, leading to bloodshed in Lithuania. In August 1991, a failed coup against Gorbachev by Soviet hardliners encouraged other non-Russian parts of the Soviet Union, such as Ukraine and the Central Asian Republics, to seek independence. On December 26, 1991, the Soviet Union dissolved more or less amicably. The three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—plus the Central Asian Republics, Ukraine, and Belarus all became independent. The Russian Federation took over all of the Soviet Union’s Great Power functions—or pretensions, as they now seemed—including control over most of its nuclear arsenal; the rest was dismantled.[2]

The United States, by contrast, soared above all other powers. In early 1991, it led an international coalition to a swift and, as it appeared, decisive victory over Saddam, the Iraqi dictator. The way in which US forces dominated the battlefield, and confounded expert predictions of a bloodbath in the desert, impressed many, and depressed others. In the light of this ‘Revolution in Military Affairs’, previous assumptions about the military balance between the leading powers were radically revised. Not just the Soviet Union and Russia, but also China and India took note that their huge fleets of armoured vehicles, aircraft, and ships were now effectively obsolete. Commentators such as Charles Krauthammer hailed America’s ‘unipolar moment’. For now, there was no longer any Great Power system, it seemed, only one almost omnipotent power, the United States, which ruled ‘all under heaven’ in an American variant of the old Chinese *tianxia*.[3]

One of those who rejected the idea that history had ‘ended’ and the Great Powers were a thing of the past was the political scientist John Mearsheimer. If that were so, he argued, ‘scholars of security affairs can stop their dreary quarrels over military doctrine and balance assessments

and turn their assessments to finding ways to prevent global warming and preserve the ozone layer'. 'European leaders', Mearsheimer added, 'can contemplate how to spend peace dividends.' He then predicted that while the next forty-five years (1990–2035) would not be as violent as the first forty-five years of the century, they would be more violent in Europe than the previous forty-five (1945–1990). The reason for this, Mearsheimer suggested, was that Great Powers competition would return, probably in the shape of German ambitions. But even he agreed that the United States was for now the unquestioned hegemon.[4]

In March 1991, shortly after the Iraqi surrender, President Bush hailed a 'New World Order'. In a speech to Congress he looked forward to 'a world where the United Nations, freed from Cold War stalemate, is poised to fulfil the historic vision of its founders. A world in which freedom and respect for human rights find a home among all nations.' Bush was in some ways, as the reference to the end of the East-West divide suggested, envisaging a post–Great Power world in which transnational organisations like the United Nations would come into their own. At the same time, the president was stressing the important role that the United States would play in upholding that order.

Faced with the apparent end of Great Power conflict, at least in Europe, many countries sought to cash in on the 'peace dividend'. Britain, France, and Germany all cut military spending throughout the 1990s. The United States also substantially reduced the proportion of its GDP devoted to defence, but, thanks to its vibrant economy, America still continued to invest heavily in its armed forces, with the result that by the middle of the decade its outlay dwarfed that of all others to an unprecedented extent. Foreign policy ceased to play a major role in domestic politics. The 'primacy of foreign policy', which had informed so much of early modern and modern political, constitutional, economic, and societal development, seemed consigned to the dustbin of history, along with the Great Powers framework which had driven it.

Meanwhile, the People's Republic of China had suppressed democratic tendencies and ridden out the half-hearted sanctions imposed by Western states after the Tiananmen Square massacre. American and European corporations poured into the country. By 1996, for example, Volkswagen

was selling 55 percent of its passenger vehicles in the PRC, and only 17 percent in Western Europe. When Hong Kong passed from British to PRC control in 1997, there was at first little change in the daily life of its inhabitants.[5]

Taken together, these developments seemed to herald the replacement of Great Power politics by a fresh dispensation which was not only post–Cold War, but in some senses post-historical. The exponential growth of air travel, the increased ease of movement—at least for residents of the more prosperous nations—and the emergence of the internet seemed to annihilate distance. More than ever, people began to consider themselves ‘citizens of the world’, and the surge in connectivity through the World Wide Web led many to speak of ‘netizens’. The economic basis of this transformation was the development of, or, if one prefers, the return to, a more global capitalism that was escaping many of the restrictions established by twentieth-century Great Power politics.

This ‘globalisation’, a word which first became part of the ambient noise in the 1990s, seemed not so much to create a new system of states as to transcend it. The state appeared to be in ‘retreat’ across the world. To its critics, globalisation was the triumph of a transnational ‘neoliberalism’; among its friends, the appellation that stuck was that of the ‘liberal international order’ (LIO). The legendary German philosopher Jürgen Habermas spoke in 1996 of ‘a period of transition from international to cosmopolitan law’. ‘Governance’, not geopolitics, was the new watchword.[6]

The 1990s saw a cascade of government deregulation and trade liberalisation across the world. In 1995, the GATT was transformed into the World Trade Organization (WTO), making global trade rules clearer and more enforceable. Fixed exchange rates and capital controls were largely abandoned. Regional economic integration took off. In 1991, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay banded together to form a free trade area called Mercosur (for Mercado Común del Sur, or Southern Common Market). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed by Canada, Mexico, and the United States in 1992 (and came into effect two years later); that same year, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) set up a free trade area. In early 1993, the EU single market

began to operate. The collective result was a surge in trade, innovation, and investment which raised incomes across the world and lifted millions out of poverty.

Of course, not everyone was happy with this new dispensation. Some critics pointed to the enduring disparities in wealth and opportunity between ‘North’ and ‘South’. Others lamented the escalating costs which runaway economic growth imposed on the environment through increased resource extraction, consumption of fossil fuels, and the resulting release of carbon into the atmosphere. A growing environmentalist movement warned that unless the world took action, ‘global warming’ would—among other things—cause the polar ice to melt and large-scale flooding of low-lying areas in many places, especially Asia and Oceania. Most developing countries rejected any curbs, arguing that they should be allowed to ‘catch up’ with the West (which at that point was responsible for the lion’s share of the damage), while vested Western interests, particularly in the United States, also resisted serious action. Yet the critique of ‘globalisation’ was itself global in that it sought collective action across the world. It certainly did not see a return to a Great Power system as the answer.

If the strategic geography of the old order had been largely ‘closed’, with states or blocs of states controlling access to their respective ‘spaces’, the new dispensation was ‘open’ and ‘interdependent’. For example, many of the main global chokepoints had been at least periodically contested in the past. Now it seemed that the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb, the Bosporus, the Danish Sound, the Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, and the Panama Canal, to name but the most important, would remain clear for the foreseeable future. Global trade, already galvanised by the entry of the PRC into the world economic system, really took off.[7]

In Europe, there were some discordances as the new order bedded down during the early 1990s. Germany was peacefully unified within NATO, but there were widespread concerns, vocalized by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and French President François Mitterrand, that the unified Germany would seek to dominate its neighbours. Meanwhile, Yugoslavia disintegrated in a welter of territorial aggression and ethnic

cleansing, mainly perpetrated by Serbs against Bosnian Muslims. Czechoslovakia split into two in 1993, albeit peacefully.

Other national disputes bubbled, especially those between Romanians and Hungarians in Transylvania. It seemed possible that Europe would fall back into the divisions of the past.

By far the biggest challenge to the European system, though, came from Russia. Russia was in danger of disintegrating still further as territories within the federation, such as Chechnya, became restive and as internal opponents of President Boris Yeltsin occupied the Russian parliament in the autumn of 1993. Yeltsin struck back, suppressing the Moscow opposition by force and invading Chechnya. Russia also intervened in a dispute in Transnistria between local Russians and the Moldovan authorities. It undertook similar actions in the Caucasus, especially in Georgia, where Moscow supported the breakaway region of Abkhazia. Russia, beset by scandals, corruption, and botched privatisations, spent the decade in a state of permanent crisis, further aggravated by an economic collapse in 1998.

These challenges were surmounted, or seemed to have been, by the end of the decade. First, the project of European integration gathered pace, partly to embed Germany in wider structures, partly to increase the prosperity of the existing member states, and partly to consolidate the democratic transformation of Central and Eastern Europe. The EU’s single market came into force in 1993. Two years later, Austria, Finland, and Sweden joined the European Union. Most European countries of the former Soviet Bloc, though not Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia itself, applied for membership. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty laid out a staged process for creating an Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), including the eventual introduction of a European single currency, the euro. The euro was introduced for accounting and electronic transactions in 1999, and physical notes and coins entered circulation in 2002.

Second, the United States and the European powers took charge of the security of most of the continent. After failing to deter Serb aggression in Bosnia for several years, NATO eventually intervened under US leadership in 1995. The resulting Dayton Agreement ended the war and established a framework for co-existence between Bosnians, Serbs, and Croats, which,

however unsatisfactory, endures to this day. In 1999, NATO intervened again, this time to stop Serb ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. That same year, the alliance began its eastward enlargement—to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic—partly driven by the desire to preempt Yugoslav-style ethnic eruptions but mainly to address enduring fears in Central and Eastern Europe about Russian ambitions.[8]

These moves signalled the end of the brief moment of post–Cold War US-Russia Great Power collaboration. The interventions in the former Yugoslavia and the enlargement of NATO were carried out against Moscow's wishes, and in the latter case a military confrontation between NATO and Russian forces at Pristina airport was only narrowly avoided when the British commander, Sir Mike Jackson, told his (NATO) American superior officer that he was 'not starting World War III' for him. Russia's leaders were deeply unhappy with their loss of global influence and sought to restore the collaborative management of the continent on the basis of their interpretation of the 1975 Helsinki Accords, which was that they should be consulted on major changes to the European order.

Western powers made some attempts to meet Moscow halfway. For example, the denuclearisation of the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan and Ukraine was carried out jointly, with the United States, the United Kingdom, and Russia all agreeing to respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine, in the 'Budapest memorandum'. Russia was invited to send peacekeepers to both Bosnia and Kosovo, asked to join NATO's Partnership for Peace programme in 1994, offered a role in maintaining peace in the 'Euro-Atlantic Area' through the NATO-Russia Founding Act in 1997, and even welcomed into the G7 grouping of the seven largest economies in the world that same year, a mark of courtesy rather than a reflection of its actual economic heft.

All in all, by the turn of the millennium, the Great Power world of the past was becoming an increasingly distant memory in Europe. The European Union explicitly sought to transcend history, not merely by overcoming the traditional Franco-German antagonism but also by creating an oasis of good governance. Flanked by NATO enlargement, it seemed as if this dream were becoming a reality. The EU was set fair to order its

continent and shape what Brussels from 2004 termed the wider ‘European Neighbourhood’.

The end of the Cold War had a much less beneficial effect on many other parts of the world. In Africa, the Soviet withdrawal brought with it a reduction of American strategic interest; the continent was now seen primarily through the lens of humanitarian relief, development aid, and peacekeeping. Geopolitically, Washington largely left Africa to its own devices, with some crises—for example, the 1994 genocide in Rwanda—allowed to spin completely out of control. In the Middle East and North Africa, local conflicts persisted regardless of the end of the Cold War. Only in Latin America did the collapse of the communist threat facilitate the transition to democracy. In all cases, outside powers, especially the Great Powers, continued to exercise considerable influence: In Latin America and the Middle East, the United States was completely dominant, while in much of sub-Saharan Africa France remained the principal ordering power.

In East Asia, the end of the Cold War did not change the Great Power calculus, not least because the Cold War never ended there. The West’s great antagonist, the People’s Republic of China, was casting off its doctrinaire Marxist economics, but it was now more hostile to the United States than at any point since the rapprochement under Nixon. Russia’s weakness destroyed the existing Great Power balance between the three states. The PRC’s only ally, North Korea, remained resolutely communist. Throughout the decade, tensions between the two allies and the Americans flared. In 1994, a crisis was narrowly averted over the North Korean nuclear programme. Two years later, the United States dispatched a carrier task force to the Taiwan Strait to deter a possible PRC attack. The South China Sea, a vital waterway linking East Asia with the rest of the world, became an area of contestation between the PRC on one side and Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, and the United States on the other.

There was also little upside to the end of the Cold War in South Asia. In fact, interstate relations there deteriorated sharply throughout the decade. The collapse of the Soviet Union upset the delicate balance between the PRC, Pakistan, and the United States on one side and India and Russia on the other. India, which had exploded its first nuclear device twenty years earlier, now moved to the overt possession of nuclear weapons. Pakistan, too, intensified its long-standing nuclear programme, testing a device in

1998. The following year, the two countries came to blows at Kargil in Kashmir in a brief shooting war. So there was plenty of Great Power tension about, but none of this changed the general sense that the advance of the liberal international order was unstoppable.

By the turn of the millennium, Eastern Europe and the Balkans had been largely ordered on Western principles, or so it seemed. The European Union and NATO were enlarging in tandem. Germany was safely ‘embedded’ in both. China was being progressively ‘engaged’ and emerging as a ‘responsible stakeholder’, or so the narrative went. Even East Timor saw the withdrawal of Indonesian troops and free elections. Globally, all this was underpinned by economic globalisation and US ‘full spectrum’ military dominance; by the end of the decade American defence spending amounted to about one-third of the world total.[9]

It was already clear, though, that resistance to the international distribution of power was growing. Partly this came from opponents of globalisation in both the Global North and the Global South (as epitomised by the spectacular riots at the WTO Conference in Seattle in 1999), partly from various non-state actors and terrorists, but most of all from the major non-Western powers. In 1999, the G20 was established to cater to this sentiment. Russia struggled with its relegation and yearned for a return to the world status it had enjoyed during the Soviet period, while China hoped to regain what it regarded as its rightful place in the global system. Both states feared US domination and the lack of political diversity which the advance of democracy would bring and sought a multipolar system instead. In 1999, Russia’s and China’s leaders issued a joint declaration to that effect.[10]

The global balance began its dramatic shift after 2001. The attacks on America by Islamist terrorists from the Afghanistan-based Al-Qaeda group on September 11, 2001, and the resulting US-led ‘Global War on Terror’ changed the course of history. In the short term, interstate relations improved as governments around the world rallied in sympathy. Some, such as Russia and China, sought to leverage the new situation to gain US imprimatur for their own struggles against refractory Muslims in Chechnya or Xinxiang. This solidarity lasted about a year, during which a US-led

Western coalition toppled the Taliban government in Afghanistan, occupied the country, and became embroiled in a long guerilla war. President George W. Bush went so far as to say in 2002 that ‘the world’s great powers [now find themselves] on the same side—united by common dangers of terrorist violence and chaos’.[11]

Then the international consensus collapsed. The administration of George W. Bush, son of the man who had defeated Saddam Hussein, toppled the Iraqi dictator in 2003 in the belief that he possessed weapons of mass destruction and that his removal would pave the way for a democratic transformation of the Middle East. This action was condemned not only by Russia and China, but also by France, Germany, and many other countries as a unilateralist American violation of international law. India was unhappy at being sidelined in favour of Pakistan, which became a vital partner in the US-led War on Terror.

The twenty-year Western deployment to the Middle East and South Asia also changed the Great Power calculus in other ways. It proved a major military, economic, and psychological drain, distracted the United States and Europe from addressing the geopolitical challenge posed by the revival of Russia and the rise of China, and damaged the already fragile image of the Global North in the Global South. The move from peer competition to complex emergencies also reduced the operational capacity and mental readiness of the West to deter conventional or nuclear Great Power threats. This trend was aggravated by the continued reduction in military spending, in real terms, in most European countries.

None of this altered the general sense that Europe had escaped the Great Power world of the past. The European Union seemed to represent a new form of geo-legal and geo-economic ordering which had rendered the old geopolitics redundant. The common currency, the euro, came into use in 2002 and soon fuelled a boom across the Union, especially along its previously poorer periphery. A series of treaties progressively widened and deepened the EU as it sought ‘ever closer Union’. If at times the pro-integrationists seemed to overreach, with defeats in national referenda in France (2005), the Netherlands (2005), and the Republic of Ireland (2001 and 2008), Brussels and the national governments quickly found solutions which paid lip service to national concerns but ploughed on regardless.

Britain, which kept clear of both the euro and the Schengen Agreement, which facilitated passportless travel among the majority of EU members (and some non-members), was an exception.

The onward march of the West was epitomised by the great ‘double enlargement’ of 2004. Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Malta, and Cyprus were admitted to the European Union. Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined NATO as well. Not long after, the democratic Orange Revolution swept the corrupt regime of Viktor Yanukovich from power in Kiev and appeared to open the way to a democratic future for Ukraine. This proved to be the high point of EU and NATO enlargement. Though a number of smaller states have joined both organisations since, a proposed admission of Ukraine to NATO, and then to the EU, foundered several years later.

At the global level, too, the liberal international order, its travails in the Middle East notwithstanding, seemed in good repair. The early and mid-2000s proved the high point of ‘globalisation’. In November 2001, the PRC joined the World Trade Organization. Within two years, Sino-American trade had grown in value from $19 billion to $28 billion. That figure would reach $562.4 billion by 2013 and then continue to rise. The PRC embarked on a period of unprecedented growth. While the expected democratisation of the regime failed to materialise, many westerners remained hopeful that the country could be integrated into the ‘rules-based international system’. Much of the EU—including Germany—assumed that Russia would follow a similar pattern. Huge pipeline projects were initiated to import Russian oil and gas.[12]

In 2003, a report from the bankers Goldman Sachs spoke of a caucus of rising non-Western powers—Brazil, Russia, India, and China. Not long after, South Africa was added to the list, more for reasons of representation than as a reflection of its actual capacities. These countries, the BRICS, collectively called for reform of the UN Security Council—that is, the addition of powers from the ‘Global South’ to balance those of the West—and what they regarded as a more equitable distribution of global resources. The contours of a potential future clash between the Western and non-Western orders were already visible.[13]

Despite this, there was an expectation that the United States and China could establish some kind of cartel for the management of the world. The idea of a ‘Group of Two’ (G2), a Washington-Beijing axis, was floated by the American economist C. Fred Bergsten in 2005. Soon after, the British historian Niall Ferguson and the German economist Moritz Schularick coined the term ‘Chimerica’ to describe the uneasy symbiosis not only between the two economies but the two polities more generally. Many—though not Ferguson and Schularick—expected the two Great Powers would now tackle the global challenges of the future for the benefit of all humanity.[14]

Towards the end of the decade, the liberal international order confronted a triple challenge. Russia’s disaffection boiled over in February 2007, when President Vladimir Putin delivered a blistering speech attacking the West at the Munich Security Conference. That same year, Russia launched a massive cyberattack on neighbouring Estonia. In 2008, alarmed by the failed US proposal to admit Georgia to NATO, Russia invaded that country. These were the first obvious signs that Putin, with his coffers swelled from the proceeds of rising energy sales, intended to reassert his country’s traditional Great Power position.

Then, in the autumn of 2008, the world became engulfed in a global financial crisis. The international response seemed to confirm the widespread view that the nation-state and the Great Powers had given way to transnational cooperation. Governments and central bankers, led by US President Barack Obama and British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, worked to restore confidence and liquidity to the international financial system. Transatlantic bonds held firm. The United States, in particular, recapitalised its banks and launched ‘quantitative easing’—of the money supply—early. In Europe, the financial crisis led to a sovereign debt crisis in those countries where the state bailed out. This crisis threatened the existence of the euro, but the affected member states preferred to take the austerity ‘medicine’ from Brussels, and the stronger states, than to leave the common currency.[15]

The global financial crisis had a profound effect on the relations between the major powers. Despite its relative success in responding, by comparison with Europe, the United States did less well in economic terms,

relatively, than the PRC. It was also distracted and diminished by the failure of its Global War on Terror. The European Union, which failed to use the crisis to establish a political union, was in even worse shape. There were mutterings about German hegemony, given Berlin's prominent role in enforcing austerity on what it regarded as the profligate periphery of the Union in Greece, the Republic of Ireland, Italy, Portugal, and Spain. The EU was thus ill prepared for the geopolitical challenges that lay ahead.[16]

Most importantly, the crisis shifted the global balance between North and South and between West and East. As the G7 struggled to master the economic headwinds, the G20, in particular the BRICS, gained greater salience. The standing of Brazil peaked. That of India steadily increased. Once global energy demand recovered, Russia cashed in through increased oil and gas sales. Above all, the crisis greatly strengthened the position of the PRC. Its economic growth during the first decade of the new millennium had been impressive; its performance in the second decade was phenomenal. In 2010, China overtook Japan to become the second largest economy in the world. The moment at which the PRC would be able to issue a fundamental challenge to the global balance now seemed much closer than it had only a few years earlier.

This socioeconomic progress was not matched, as many westerners had expected, by a corresponding increase in political freedoms in China. On the contrary, the grip of the regime tightened over time. The accession of Xi Jinping as general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party and chairman of the Central Military Commission since 2012, and president of the People's Republic of China since 2013, marked a caesura. Under his tutelage, whatever political liberalisation had taken place in the PRC was slowly rolled back. The Uighur Muslims were subjected to exceptionally harsh treatment and the autonomous powers of Hong Kong more or less completely curtailed.

The increasing challenge posed by Russia and the PRC to the Western order soon resulted in a series of confrontations. In January 2009, Russia temporarily halted gas deliveries to Ukraine. This was ostensibly over disputed payments, but it was interpreted by many as a sign that Moscow was willing to use energy as a geopolitical weapon. A year later, the PRC cut the export of vital critical minerals to Japan over a fishing dispute. This

was little remarked on at the time, but it showed the vulnerability of Western supply chains. In 2011, the Arab Spring—a surge of anti-autocratic revolts in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Syria—caused further tensions. Russia and the PRC reluctantly agreed to the containment of Libya's dictator Muammar Gaddafi through Anglo-French air power, but they strongly opposed his removal and execution. When the unrest spread to Syria, a Russian ally, Moscow feared for its Mediterranean naval base at Tartus.

The Western powers and publics were not only slow to react to these changes in the geopolitical landscape, but in many ways refused to accept that they were happening. When Americans voted for Barack Obama and 'hope' in the 2008 presidential election, they were also voting against Senator John McCain and his emphasis on the challenge from Moscow. When they voted again four years later, Obama ridiculed the Republican candidate's suggestion that Russia was the most serious threat facing America; the Cold War, he quipped, was 'over', and relations with the Russians should be 'reset'. That same year, Russia was admitted to the WTO. In Britain, the Conservative government of David Cameron was slow to see the Russian threat and looked forward to a 'Golden Era' of trade with the PRC.

These tendencies were even more marked in mainland Europe, where the thirst for Russian energy and Chinese commerce was insatiable. There was plenty of societal malaise around migration, the economic crisis, and climate change, but little sense of geopolitical threat, at least outside Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. The steady decline in defence spending as a proportion of GDP continued, and in some cases even accelerated. Great Power conflict still seemed remote; the continent set about commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War as a tragedy which the European Union had overcome. Europe, in other words, still nestled snugly in the rules-based post–Great Power order it had invented for itself.

The Western powers were not merely complacent, they were also divided. When NATO confronted Gaddafi in 2011, Germany unexpectedly stood aside and abstained on the United Nations Security Council vote authorising intervention. Two years later, the United States and Britain were on the verge of intervening against the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad over his use of chemical weapons. They were derailed by a vote of the House of

Commons and the president's reluctance to embroil the United States in a Middle Eastern war. Obama's notorious failure to enforce his 'red line' after Assad disregarded his warnings not to use chemical weapons against civilians opened the door to subsequent Russian military deployments in Syria. In East Asia, any chance of a common front against the PRC was torpedoed by continued Japanese–South Korean tensions over Japanese wartime atrocities. The idea that the Chinese threat might require hard economic decisions had not yet gained much traction in the capitals of Western-oriented Asian states.

Three years into the second decade of the new millennium, much of the world was still in the grip of a new 'Great Illusion'. It believed that the main global actors were far too interdependent economically to allow a revival of traditional Great Power politics. To be sure, the Middle East was in turmoil, and Great Power tensions periodically flared in East Asia, but these were seen as echoes from the past, not portents for the future. Governments and publics around the globe did not expect the world of the Great Powers to return with a vengeance. Soon they would be disabused.

Four

The Return of ‘Peer Competition’

THE PROCESS OF globalisation which embraced most of the world by the turn of the millennium, the great economic surge underpinning the liberal international order, was generally supposed to have transcended the traditional Great Power system. Instead, it led to the emergence of new economic powerhouses in China and India as well as a (renewed) energy superpower in the shape of Russia. These states leveraged globalisation to bolster their Great Power status through World Trade Organization accession, supply chain dominance, and supply chain integration. This in turn drove the re-emergence of a Great Power dynamic which threatened to undo globalisation and the rules-based international order, long dismissed by Russia and China as a Western cartel. The American reaction to this was not so much an abandonment of the liberal international order as a recognition that the return of Great Power politics had rendered it defunct. Of course, Washington’s own actions, such as selective treaty withdrawals and unilateral interventions, had also contributed to undermining that order.

At the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, there was—at least on the surface—little sign of the Great Power turbulence ahead. The rules-based international order had survived the global financial crisis more or less intact. Globalisation was still in full throttle, with particularly impressive economic growth rates in India and the People’s Republic of China. Some predicted that the century ahead would be a ‘Chinese Century’. Others spoke of ‘Chimerica’, a Sino-American perpetual motion machine in which Chinese exports paid for the mass PRC purchase of US Treasury bonds, which funded American purchases of Chinese goods; of course, the term—with its allusion to mythology—also expressed the

essential fragility of the arrangement. In Europe, Russian sales of energy grew steadily and the construction of a second pipeline across the Baltic Sea continued apace. The world seemed to be experiencing, as the former president of the United Nations Security Council and celebrated international commentator Kishore Mahbubani once put it, a ‘Great Convergence’ towards ‘one world’ in which ‘inter-state wars have become a sunset industry’.[1]

This outlook was shared by most Western politicians, business leaders, and much of the public sphere. Barack Obama’s 2010 National Security Strategy, when describing ‘the world as it is’, spoke of a world in which, for all its problems, ‘the circle of peaceful democracies has expanded, the specter of nuclear war has lifted [and] major powers are at peace’. There was a general expectation that China would ‘rise’ peacefully and become more liberal as it did so. In this world, there were no Great Powers, but only international ‘governance’. Corporations worried about regulation and ‘compliance’, and periodically about terrorism or state failure, dubbed ‘political’ or ‘sovereign’ risk, but not about the wider ramifications of geopolitics.[2]

The main concern of international institutions, national publics, and national governments, outside of domestic politics, were transnational issues such as illegal immigration, terrorism, and—increasingly—climate change. In 2015, the Paris Agreement finally committed the vast majority of the world, including the United States, Russia, India, and the PRC, to cut the greenhouse gas emissions which cause global warming. The parties set themselves the aim of limiting the global temperature increase to below 2 percent over preindustrial levels, which required a 70 percent reduction in carbon released into the atmosphere by 2050. It seemed as if the Great Powers were now in accord on how to tackle this existential question. What was less obvious, but soon became clear, was that the manufacture of the necessary ‘green’ technologies—such as electric vehicles, solar panels, and wind turbines—and the ability to source the critical minerals needed to build them would become areas of Great Power competition.[3]

To many, though, the most important players in the system were no longer the sovereign states but the great corporations, especially the American tech companies, which were taking over more and more of global

economic, social, and cultural life. One country, Denmark, even maintained diplomatic representation in Silicon Valley. The founder of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg, was treated like a powerful foreign leader during his 2013 visit to Germany. ‘Big Tech bosses’, the state secretary at the German Foreign Ministry remarked, ‘are the new princes.’[4]

In other parts of the world, though, especially Russia and China, Great Power politics remained the primary frame of reference. This became evident in 2014 with Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine. Russia’s seizure of territory from a sovereign state was the most fundamental breach of international law seen in Europe since the Second World War. Although Russia was expelled from the G8 in retaliation, the failure of the United Nations to agree to an effective response, and the anaemic sanctions imposed by a European Union still massively dependent on Russian energy, showed the inability of the globalised world to deal with a traditional Great Power challenge. Some saw Russia’s aggression as the last gasp of a bygone era, others as a portent of things to come.[5]

The People’s Republic of China was less aggressive but also appeared to be acting according to a power-political rather than a primarily economic rationale. In September 2013, Beijing announced the ‘One Belt One Road Initiative’, a vast infrastructural programme designed to connect China via Central Asia with Europe. This was partly intended to boost exports, partly to increase Chinese leverage in the area, but mainly to ensure that the PRC could not be cut off from all world markets by an American naval blockade. Then, in September 2014, despite its growing trade relationship with India, the PRC provoked a confrontation at Ladakh along the disputed Sino-Indian border. This was part of a broader pattern of Chinese assertiveness.

In 2016, the concepts of globalisation and international governance suffered another blow. The United Kingdom voted by a small but decisive margin to leave the European Union, one of the pillars of the liberal international order. That same year, Donald Trump won his first presidential election. His brutal critique of international organisations such as the United Nations, and his determination to put ‘America First’, was widely interpreted as a threat to the rules-based international system. In fact, Trump’s first administration was a symptom rather than a cause of the

return of Great Power politics. Henceforth, the United States would aggressively pursue American primacy over all rivals, including Russia, but especially the People's Republic of China. It would also link economics and national security in ways not previously seen.

The final years of the decade saw an intensification of Great Power struggles. In Ukraine, the Trump administration broke with the Obama policy and sent lethal aid to the Ukrainians in order to support them against Putin. Syria became a cockpit of power rivalries, as did the Middle East as a whole. Saudi Arabia and Iran clashed in Yemen. The United States, Israel, and various Arab countries piled pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear weapons programme. None of these rivalries had much to do with economics. They were principally about strategic competition driven by ideological rivalry. The US National Security Strategy in 2017 spoke explicitly of 'competition' from rivals in search of 'great power status', and of China and Russia as 'revisionist powers', while US officials routinely began to refer to the return of 'great power rivalry'. Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, specifically referencing Russia and the PRC, warned corporations against risk from 'Great Powers behaving badly'.[6]

In Asia, the Trump administration's first confrontation was with North Korea over its quest for an atomic bomb and delivery system. When its ruler Kim Jong Un embarked on a series of nuclear and missile tests in 2017–2018, the United States reacted with the dispatch of a carrier strike force. The two countries came close to all-out war. Again, the issues at stake were entirely geopolitical. Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world—ranked 138th in terms of global GDP, even using the generous purchasing power parity metric—North Korea enjoyed a much greater importance in Great Power politics than many much richer states: It was cited no fewer than fifteen times in the 2017 US National Security Strategy, more than any other country apart from China, Russia, and Iran.[7]

The most important development, though, was the return of Great Power rivalry in Asia more generally, where the United States was determined to confront China. Despite its protectionist tendencies, the Trump administration endorsed the Japanese concept of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific, and even concluded a trade deal with South Korea in September 2018. In April 2017, the United States, India, Japan, and Australia re-

established the defunct Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or ‘Quad’. This was mainly designed to rally the region against China, but also—and relatedly—emphasised a common commitment to democratic values, freedom of navigation, and disaster relief. In January of the following year, Trump imposed tariffs on the PRC, triggering a trade war which has continued over three administrations to the present day. Washington began to talk of ‘decoupling’ from China. In 2018, the US Navy established a new ‘Indo-Pacific Command’ to indicate the connection it saw between the two theatres.

If it was in the economic interest of the tech giants to extend the golden age of globalisation, with its ever-expanding markets, they were increasingly caught up in these growing geopolitical tensions. The actors now included not only the established American leaders, such as Google, Facebook, and LinkedIn, but also Chinese upstarts such as Tencent, TikTok, and Huawei, which was responsible for much of Europe’s 5G infrastructure. At American insistence, many European countries now began, at great cost, to eject Chinese providers from sensitive parts of their critical infrastructure. Geopolitics trumped economics.

The escalating Great Power confrontation also affected the global response to climate change, first because the rise in temperatures opened up new areas to commercial exploitation and geopolitical competition. This was particularly the case in the Arctic, with Russia’s increased militarisation of the region and Chinese investments in Greenland. Second, the ‘net-zero’ targets—that is, commitments to achieve an overall end to greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2050—from international agreements of the past twenty years required ‘green technologies’, which were in turn dependent on ‘critical metals’. Access to these was controlled by the Great Powers, especially China, which also had an effective monopoly on their processing. Globalisation, which was supposed to transcend war, had turned out to weaponise everything. One way or the other, by the end of the decade there was a widespread, though far from universal, sense that the liberal international order was giving way to a new Great Power system.[8]

The COVID pandemic which engulfed the world in 2020–2021 did not, as many expected, drive the major global actors to transcend their geopolitical differences. On the contrary, the crisis both aggravated and was

aggravated by existing antagonisms. There was a battle of narratives between China and the West about the origins of the virus, which may have been the result of a Chinese lab leak, and about which system was coping better with the challenges it created. On the vaccine front, China's Sinopharm (China National Pharmaceutical Group) and Russia's Sputnik vaccines were compared with the Western variants, just as the United Kingdom's AstraZeneca vaccine was with the European Union's BioNTech option. While some countries limited or even halted the export of vaccines, others raced to distribute them to the 'Global South'. Once the pandemic had passed, its memory receded, rather like that of the Spanish flu of 1918–1920, while the Great Power ambitions and resentments remained unchanged.[9]

Geopolitically, the lasting legacies of the global COVID emergency included heightened Western suspicion of the PRC, a feeling of abandonment by the West among the 'rest', an erosion of trust in multilateral health governance—especially the World Health Organization—and a greater sense of anxiety around supply chain security almost everywhere. The crisis accelerated the trend towards Sino-American 'decoupling' and the reshoring of manufacturing away from China either back to the United States or to friendlier countries. It also deepened geopolitical alignments, with states relying more heavily on either China or the United States for medical aid, technology, and vaccines.

In 2021–2022, the Great Power contest resumed with increased vigour. Its epicentre seemed to be in Asia. 'We are in competition with China and other countries to win the twenty-first century', President Joe Biden told Congress in April 2021, not long after taking office. At around the same time, his secretary of state, Antony Blinken, troubled by Russian rhetoric over Ukraine, warned the Kremlin that 'we don't accept the principle of "spheres of influence"'. Biden framed this contest against the Sino-Russian threat as one between democracy and autocracy. Likewise, the European Union declared the PRC to be a 'systemic rival'; it was also increasingly concerned with Russian designs on Ukraine.[10]

After the summer of 2021, America's chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan was used by Russian propagandists to suggest that the United States would abandon Ukraine, and by Chinese ones to claim that it would

leave Taiwan in the lurch. The Kremlin's propaganda offensive against Kiev gathered pace, and its troop movements on the border became ever more menacing. In September 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States formed the AUKUS submarine alliance, primarily designed to contain the PRC. As the United States, the EU, Britain, Japan, and various other actors formed up on the Western side, Moscow and Beijing moved closer together on theirs. In early February 2022, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping proclaimed a 'partnership without limits', though in practice there were to be serious constraints on their partnership with respect to direct military assistance. A fortnight later, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Putin's attack revealed the extent to which the global order had shifted from a rules-based structure to a more predatory Great Power system. Not least thanks to Russia's veto on the Security Council, the United Nations proved completely incapable of responding to a straightforward attempt at territorial annexation. The European Union, a geo-economic rather than geopolitical power, was also out of its depth. Germany and Japan lacked the capacity to intervene decisively and were constrained by history. France, which did possess relevant capabilities, was embarrassed by the failure of President Emmanuel Macron's dialogue with Putin. The only two powers which reacted to considerable effect were Britain and America, whose intelligence services had warned of the attack, and which supplied Ukraine with vital military aid immediately before and after the invasion.

In 2022–2023, the United States assembled a coalition which consistently performed below its capacity but was strong enough to help Ukraine weather the initial storm. Military, economic, and humanitarian aid flowed to Kiev, which inflicted serious reverses on Moscow even before the bulk of the support arrived. Western companies exited Russia en masse. Russia was unplugged from the international financial system, or at least from the majority of it. The invasion prompted greater cohesion in NATO and increased European defence spending, and it led to the admission of Finland and Sweden to the alliance. Over time, Western military and intelligence assistance, especially the use of the long-range High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) and similar equipment, would be

closely coordinated by American officers. Increasingly, Russia argued that it was ‘at war’ with the West and, in particular, the United States.[11]

Putin’s move triggered a strong reaction in Asia, where Japan, South Korea, and especially Taiwan feared that his actions would embolden Xi to take action against them. ‘Today’s Ukraine’, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida warned, ‘could be tomorrow’s East Asia.’ The connection was also made in Eastern and Northern Europe. Lithuania, which had provoked the PRC by allowing the opening of a ‘Taiwanese Representative Office’ in Vilnius, in turn opened a representative office in Taipei some months after the invasion. Japan and South Korea attended NATO summits devoted to supporting Ukraine, ensuring high-level coordination between European and Asian allies. European navies continued their freedom of navigation patrols in the Indo-Pacific.[12]

The link between the two continents was complicated because America’s allies worried both that Washington might commit to one front rather than the other, and that retreat on one side of the globe might encourage attacks on the other. This fear was not without foundation, as there was a lively debate in Washington between those who saw Russia as the main challenge and those who were more focused on the PRC. Clearly, aircraft carrier groups and munitions stockpiles could not be in two places at once—they would have to be deployed to one theatre or the other. The Asian allies, though, refused to see things in terms of a zero-sum game. As Japanese Deputy Defence Minister Makoto Oniki put it in September 2024, democratic Asia faced ‘the Head of the Dragon and the Tail of the Bear’, whereas Europe faced ‘the Head of the Bear and the Tail of the Dragon’. Asia and Europe were bound up in a community of deterrence.[13]

There was also widespread concern that the two theatres would merge into one open conflict, as they had in December 1941. Rhetorically, that was already the case, as the Biden administration spoke of a global clash between democracy and autocracy and framed its military contribution as ‘Lend Lease’, echoing that given by Franklin Delano Roosevelt to the British starting in 1941. In the summer of 2022, a visit by the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, to Taiwan provoked the worst cross-strait tensions in a very long time. The PRC launched sustained intimidatory military exercises around Taiwan and formally suspended

several US-China dialogue channels. The G7, the governing board of the ‘collective West’, represented by the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Italy, Canada, and Japan, evolved into a global economic security organisation directed against both Russia and China. In May 2023, they announced at the G7’s Hiroshima Summit that they would band together to resist ‘economic coercion’ and to reduce ‘vulnerabilities and dependencies’. There were coordinated restrictions on the export of sensitive technologies to China, joint investment screening mechanisms, and efforts to cap Russian energy revenues.[14]

So far, the European and Asian confrontations have remained distinct. China enabled Moscow to circumvent the Western sanctions, supplied it with dual-use technology, and increased its energy imports from Russia, but did not—so far—send any direct military aid or launch any invasions of its own. Rather than escalating, Beijing seemed anxious to prevent the war in Ukraine from spiralling out of control. In the autumn of 2022, for example, Xi and the German chancellor openly rebuked Russian talk of the use of nuclear weapons. All the same, the PRC could not afford for Russia to lose the war, or to forfeit too much of its international standing. Sino-Russian diplomatic and military collaboration steadily intensified after Russia’s attack. After a summit in Moscow in March 2023, Xi was caught off-microphone saying, ‘We are seeing changes unseen for 100 years and we are driving them.’[15]

Meanwhile, the rest of the world tried to keep out of both confrontations. Few agreed with Putin’s war of aggression on Ukraine, but there was widespread sympathy for Russia more generally. In many parts of the world, Moscow could draw on elite memories of Soviet support during the Cold War, and publics in the ‘Global South’ tended to sympathise with anyone who was ‘standing up’ to the West. Three months into the invasion, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt all registered net positive views of Russia. As the war dragged on, and its consequences were felt across the world in terms of inflation and food shortages driven by the disruption of Ukrainian grain exports and spikes in fertiliser prices, irritation with Western support for Ukraine mounted.[16]

When the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas attacked Israel in October 2023, the picture became even more complicated. The raiders not

only killed hundreds of civilians, from among the attendees at a music festival, but also carried off hundreds of civilian hostages, some of them young children. The subsequent brutal Israeli response killed more than sixty thousand Palestinians of all ages, the majority of them civilians. Eventually, the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as well as against various Hamas figures. Many in the ‘Global South’, especially in Muslim-majority countries, felt much more strongly about Palestine than they did about Ukraine; the same was true among most Muslim immigrant groups in the West. Even if most of Western opinion still prioritised Ukraine, most of it was now highly critical of Israel. President Biden’s attempt, shortly after the attack, to bracket Hamas and Putin as threats to the international order misfired, and the apparent disparity between his reaction to Israel and his response to Russia left him open to the charge of double standards.[17]

Despite widespread grumbling about Western dominance, Russia largely failed in its attempt to mobilise a global coalition in its support. To be sure, Moscow was able to convene BRICS summits, at which the status of the dollar was widely questioned. But there was no united BRICS front, not least because India’s fear of China far outweighed any annoyance about the United States. Indeed, there was another Sino-Indian clash along the border at Ladakh in December 2022.

In South-East Asia, the largest uncommitted region in world politics, there was widespread indifference over whether China or the United States won the battle for supremacy, so long as the victor obeyed the ‘rules’. Some states, such as Burma and Laos, leaned towards Beijing; others, such as the Philippines, towards Washington. Singapore straddled the fence, but was critical of the United States for pushing too hard for a commitment against China. ‘Please don’t force us to choose,’ many South-East Asian governments warned Washington, ‘because you may not like the answer.’

The tensions between China and the US-led coalition in the Indo-Pacific mounted throughout 2024. Washington pushed ahead with a slow decoupling from China, at least in respect of certain key industries, such as semi-conductors, rare earth minerals, and advanced telecommunications. In July 2024, the Russians and the Chinese conducted joint air patrols off

Alaska. Two months later, a Chinese aircraft carrier and two destroyers entered Japan's waters off its south coast, the first time this had happened.

The new Great Power rivalry also began to extend into outer space, which had long been an area of international cooperation. This was not surprising, as many terrestrial systems—such as communications networks—depend on satellites in orbit. The strategic importance of these was amply demonstrated by the way in which Elon Musk's Starlink infrastructure kept Ukraine 'connected' after its access to the internet was disrupted by the Russian invasion. Outer space was also seen as a potential source of minerals, food, and even land for colonization. It was also conceived as a launchpad and a conduit, a staging ground to attack the enemy from above. The emerging struggle for outer space, in other words, in many ways resembled that of the earlier Great Powers in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, where they had sought resources to leverage against each other. As the head of the PRC's Lunar Exploration Programme, Ye Peijian, put it, 'If we don't go there [to outer space] now even though we are capable of doing so, then we will be blamed by our descendants.' 'If others go there,' he continued, 'then they will take over.'[18]

All of this had profound implications for the big tech firms and especially for the growing field of artificial intelligence (AI), which was seen as a force multiplier for economic, military, and intelligence capabilities. The struggle here was for data pools to identify trends and customers, and the vital 'chips' that could be used to guide missiles, as much as to provide computing power for training and running AI models. In the first case, the battle was a three-sided contest between the United States, China, and the European Union over access to data. The second struggle concerned the design and manufacture of advanced chips, in which the West had a distinct advantage. Brussels sought not only to protect Europe's data but also to mitigate the fallout from the Sino-American confrontation—for example, US pressure not to sell advanced chips to the PRC. The situation was complicated by the fact that most advanced chips were manufactured in Taiwan.[19]

In the autumn of 2023, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak convened an AI Safety Summit. It soon became clear, however, that attempts at international collaboration were failing. US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo

warned companies that ‘if you redesign a chip around a particular cut line that enables [China] to do AI, I’m going to control it the very next day’. The unveiling of the Chinese AI model DeepSeek in January 2025 showed that America’s lead in the sector was eroding fast. So while the tech wars were partly about creating and controlling a whole new territory—sometimes called ‘the metaverse’—they were also about some very old-fashioned geopolitics.[20]

Slowly but surely, and sometimes quickly and dramatically, globalisation—or at least its Sino-American variant—was being unwound. The Sino-American trade war was emblematic of gradual deglobalisation, and the Nord Stream Pipeline, shut down by Russia and subsequently blown up by unknown forces, was symbolic of sudden deglobalisation. In early 2024, well before Donald Trump’s second election as president, US trade official Katherine Tai welcomed a steep drop in trade with China—which peaked as recently as 2022—as a ‘positive indication of diversification on both sides’. ‘Ten years ago,’ retired US General David Petraeus remarked in November 2023, ‘we were in an era of benign globalization.… It was characterized by the barriers to investment, capital flows, trade, generally being reduced.’ ‘We’re now in an era of renewed Great Power rivalries,’ he continued. ‘You see barriers to trade, investment, and capital flows increasing.’ ‘Geopolitics’, the former EU ambassador to London, João Vale de Almeida, observed, was ‘trump[ing] geo-economics’.[21]

This did not mean that every state was retreating in on itself, though the rhetoric sometimes made it sound like that. In many cases the decoupling from the PRC led not to ‘reshoring’ manufacturing back to the United States but to ‘friend-shoring’ to less hostile but still lower-cost production centres, such as Vietnam, India, and Mexico. It also boosted regional trade agreements, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, a multilateral trade agreement which now includes, among others, Australia, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam. The world economy, once apparently on the path to complete globalisation, was breaking up, not into fragments but into blocs.

One way or the other, however, across the world the costs to business mounted. In the case of Nord Stream alone, interstate rivalry had rendered more than $11 billion worth of undersea infrastructure redundant. Many household names, such as the brewer Carlsberg, McDonald's, and energy giants such as Exxon Mobil and Shell, lost more than $1 billion each pulling out of Russia. The costs of 'derisking' from China in critical areas—for example, by ripping out Huawei systems—were enormous. In the PRC, companies faced higher entry barriers to Western markets. Foreign companies began to think in terms of producing in China for China, rather than for export.

The corporate world, which had long focused only on 'governance'—that is, on process and legal compliance—scrambled to adjust to the new situation. 'What I am really worried about', the chief executive of JP MorganChase, Jamie Dimon, remarked in December 2023, 'is geopolitics.' 'We can deal with recessions,' he continued. 'What we can't deal with is the book written 40 years from now saying how the west lost.' A poll of five hundred institutional investors in 2024 listed 'geopolitics' as the principal risk to markets and the global economy. Companies rushed to hire 'geopolitical advisors'. JP Morgan even set up a Center for Geopolitics, and the management consultants McKinsey & Company set up a 'Geopolitics Practice'. Major firms began to run military-style simulations to prepare for the possibility of a PRC invasion of Taiwan, cyberattacks, or sanctions. This was not just corporate prudence: The cascade of new export controls, investment screening, and supply chain directives in the United States, the European Union, the United Kingdom, and other major actors forced companies to think geopolitically whether they wanted to or not.[22]

As a result, Western companies sought to secure their supply chains by diversifying away from potential adversaries: A Santander Bank survey of UK firms found that a quarter of them were planning to restructure away from China. Pension funds began to reduce their exposure to PRC assets. Corporations began to build localised data centres and storage infrastructure to comply with national security laws, particularly in Europe, India, and China, where data localisation is becoming mandatory. Businesses started to hedge against sanctions and exclusion from the global banking system by exploring alternative payment systems such as cryptocurrencies or regional

currency swaps. Companies in sectors like semiconductors, pharmaceuticals, and critical minerals started to build months' and even years' worth of inventory to avoid supply shocks. In addition to the business case, investors and customers were pushing corporations to exit markets associated with forced labour (especially in China), authoritarian repression, and environmental destruction; values and geopolitics were increasingly intertwined.[23]

Of course, some countries and companies profited from this re-orientation. Energy diversification away from Russia boosted American and Qatari LNG exporters and suppliers of renewable energy. Western telecommunications providers stepped in to replace the networks previously delivered by Huawei. Others frantically tried to adapt or obfuscate—the Chinese fast fashion giant Shein, for instance, briefly claimed to be an American company. One way or the other, the 'wealth of nations' was being replaced by the 'security of nations'. A new economic order was in the making.[24]

In the course of 2024, the Great Powers continued to manoeuvre for advantage. Thanks to the success of its private military companies, such as the Wagner Group, Russia won ground in Africa, particularly in its western parts, where French power was on the decline. In Syria, though, Russia was forced to accept the fall of Bashar al-Assad, a dictator whom it had propped up for nearly ten years, and the loss of its bases there. In the Pacific, Chinese influence rose and fell in the Solomons and other islands depending on the fortunes of local governments.[25]

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine ground on. In the summer of 2024, Ukrainian forces launched a surprise incursion into the Russian province of Kursk, capturing a sizeable chunk of territory it intended to use as a bargaining chip in future peace negotiations. Moscow, which had threatened to use nuclear weapons to defend lands seized in Ukraine itself but failed to do so, now declined to use them to defend Russia proper. Instead, Putin hired thousands of North Korean troops, who soon began to push the Ukrainians back.

These developments were accompanied by major domestic struggles which both drove and were driven by geopolitics. In October 2024, the

Romanian Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the country's presidential election on the grounds that the winner, a pro-Russian maverick, had received covert social media support from Moscow. Fresh elections during the following year brought victory for the pro-Western candidate. In December 2024, South Korea underwent a constitutional crisis when President Yoon Suk Yeol attempted to impose martial law on the spurious grounds that the country was on the verge of being subverted by 'pro-Pyongyang' forces. The outcome, which brought in a man less close to Washington and more sceptical of Tokyo, left the US alliance weakened and hopes for reconciliation with Japan apparently in tatters, thus benefitting the PRC and North Korea.[26]

By the middle of the decade, it was clear that the rules-based international order had largely given way to a new Great Power world, and had been doing so for some time. It was also evident that although the United States remained the most important actor, it was increasingly finding itself challenged by rising non-Western powers. What was less obvious was whether this new order was bipolar, multipolar, or shaped by some other characteristic.[27]

Russia and the PRC were both Great Powers, but they were also discrete 'poles'. While they were aligned on some issues, it was quite possible to imagine them in conflict, even armed conflict. By contrast, the United States and the United Kingdom were two separate powers, albeit of unequal strength, but it was hard to imagine them being different poles, let alone engaged in armed conflict. Similarly, while the states of the European Union certainly formed their own 'pole' distinct from the United States and the United Kingdom, it was also difficult to imagine them engaged in armed conflict with each other.

The world of 2024, towards the end of the Biden administration, was thus a bi-order system, with the United States, the United Kingdom, the EU, Japan, Canada, Australia, and various other powers in the Western democratic order, and Russia, the PRC, and their allies—especially Iran, Belarus, and North Korea—in the opposing Eastern and Southern autocratic camp. If this clash of orders was a defining feature of global relations, it was not the only one. The individual members of both orders often continued to pursue aims which were unrelated or only tangentially related

to the overarching struggle, such as Iran's quarrel with and American support for Israel. Moreover, at least one major actor, India, was not aligned to either camp.[28]

The start of the second Trump administration in early 2025 completely changed this picture, or appeared to. If during his first presidency Donald Trump pursued a policy of Great Power American dominance over both China and Russia, this time around he seemed to have moved to a more multipolar understanding of the world. The distinction Biden had made between democracies and dictatorships gave way to a narrower focus on US interests as the administration defined them. If there was an ideological content to US policy, it lay in the promotion of a—supposedly—'free speech' and 'anti-woke' agenda in Europe, rather than in defending representative governments against the Sino-Russian threat.

The prominent presence of tech moguls—Elon Musk of Tesla, Jeff Bezos of Amazon, Tim Cook of Apple, Sundar Pichai of Google, and Mark Zuckerberg of Meta—at Trump's second inauguration, where they were seated ahead of the president's cabinet nominations, suggested that American tech giants, once seen as major international actors in their own right, had become extended arms of the US government. The same, of course, had long been true of their counterparts in the PRC, such as Huawei, and in Russia, such as Gazprom.[29]

In February to April 2025, the Trump administration launched a number of initiatives which seemed to portend a fundamental shift in the structure of the international system, and perhaps also a *renversement des alliances*. Washington started direct talks with Russia over Ukraine and signalled that it did not expect Putin to restore the borders of 2014 (or even of 2022). Trump then tried to force Ukraine to sign its natural resources over to the United States as payment for past support; the deal eventually signed was more limited. Neither Ukraine nor any European power was invited to the first talks in Saudi Arabia. Then Trump not only berated Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky at the White House, but briefly suspended intelligence cooperation with Ukraine. It looked as if the future of Ukraine would not be decided by any international rules but by a deal between the Great Powers.

More broadly, Washington seemed at first to be moving towards a new Great Power global cartel run by the United States, Russia, China, and perhaps India, but with no European involvement. ‘Part of diplomatic relations’, the new US secretary of state, Marco Rubio, stated, ‘is the ability to communicate with and manage through problems with other great powers around the world and to avoid war and avoid conflict.’ He defined Great Powers as ‘big powerful countries with nuclear stockpiles’ which ‘can project power globally’.[30]

The Trump administration also made clear that it would focus more closely on the Western Hemisphere. This was partly a matter of securing the southern border against illegal migration, which was done rapidly through the deployment of military force. But there was also a much broader agenda in evidence. Trump was determined to re-exert US control over the Panama Canal. He also laid claim to the self-governing Danish territory of Greenland, causing consternation in Copenhagen. Finally, the president repeatedly suggested that Canada become the fifty-first state of the United States. Trump was obviously serious about his inaugural pledge to ‘expand’ the United States and was trying to build a hemispheric redoubt to keep out rival powers, especially China. More broadly, given the president’s pointed refusal to rule out the use of force over Greenland and Canada, the United States could no longer straightforwardly be reckoned part of a coherent Western order. The world had become, at least for now, truly multipolar.

All of this precipitated a collective nervous breakdown among American allies. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan feared abandonment. The Europeans pledged much greater defence expenditure, through a combination of special EU funds and increased national budgets in countries such as Germany. Then the Trump administration unveiled its radical tariff regime on April 2, 2025, ‘Liberation Day’. This was initially directed as much against the United States’ allies as its rivals. The US treasury secretary warned everybody not to ‘immediately retaliate’, because ‘that’s how you get escalation’. When Beijing retaliated nonetheless, the tariffs on China were ratchetted up further.[31]

Across the Western world, globalisation, already tottering, was now widely pronounced completely dead. In its place the Trump administration appeared to want a more fragmented global economy in which the United

States maintained trade surpluses with all its major partners. Rather than allies, Washington appeared to prefer vassals who would pay tribute to the United States. The president himself publicly boasted that trade partners were lining up to make a deal and, as he put it, ‘kissing my ass’. The world seemed to be moving, one Indian wag said, from a ‘Pax Americana’ to a ‘Tax Americana’.[32]

More broadly, the old Anglo-American order which had morphed into the rules-based international system appeared to have finally run its course. Trump’s domestic political base, the Make America Great Again (MAGA) coalition, was firmly anti-globalist. It eschewed commercial and maritime universalism for a more territorially grounded foreign policy. Close to home, this meant a preoccupation with homeland security. Farther away, the new policy was focused on supporting what the base regarded as ‘authentic’ nation-states, such as Viktor Orban’s Hungary, over international organisations such as NATO, the United Nations, or the European Union.

By the middle of 2025, though, it appeared that Trump was running out of patience with Putin. Repeated attempts to bring about a ceasefire in Ukraine failed because of the Kremlin’s intransigence. The United States began to restore its military support for Ukraine, including the provision of intelligence, and in August 2025 Trump imposed tariffs on India to punish it for buying discounted Russian oil, and thus fuelling Putin’s war machine. Despite predictions that Trump would abandon Ukraine when he met Putin at a summit in Alaska later that month—Putin’s first face-to-face meeting with a major Western leader since the start of the war—the US president did not do so, albeit after frantic European intervention on Kiev’s behalf.

At the same time, the MAGA wing of American conservatism seemed to lose ground, at least as far as geopolitics was concerned. Against furious opposition from the far right in the United States, Trump joined Israel in launching air strikes on the Iranian nuclear weapons programme. A well-publicised visit by Vice President JD Vance to the Cotswolds area of rural England breathed new life into the traditional Anglo-American connection. Veteran Republican US senator and national security expert Lindsey Graham was mustering Congress to pass a massive set of secondary sanctions on countries buying Russian oil. As 2025 drew to a close, the traditional foreign policy Republicanism of (much of) Trump’s first

presidential term, which appeared completely eclipsed at the start of the year, began to resurface.

Meanwhile, the Trump tariffs provoked a short but sharp financial crisis as share values fell in expectation of reduced international trade. If the carnage on the stock markets was not enough to shift the administration, the incipient revolt of the bond market forced the president to yield. As hedge funds began to sell US Treasuries, US borrowing costs began to rise. If the biggest state holders of US government bonds, such as Japan and China, had sold their bonds in large numbers, the result would have been catastrophic. Trump scaled back the tariffs, including those on China; he blinked. In the course of 2025, new trade agreements with the United Kingdom, the European Union, and various other economies followed. The old order, it appeared, was not dead, or not dead yet. It turned out that it was not really possible to imagine American global power outside the system it had itself invented.

Part II

THE ALMOST GREAT POWERS

Five

The Self-Restraint of Japan

JAPAN IS BOTH an old and a young Great Power. It came late on the scene towards the end of the nineteenth century, but by the second quarter of the twentieth, the Japanese Empire was indisputably one of the five or six greatest players in the world. Then came the disaster of the Second World War, after which the country began its slow, and far from complete, return to Great Power status. Japan is an illustration of the constraints of history, and of the way in which formidable economic power does not automatically translate into Great Powerness. Its geopolitical potential is far from realised, and in fact seems to be eroding. Today, as it grapples with the challenges of economic stagnation and a rapidly aging population, Japan stands at a crossroads. As China advances, and the United States retreats globally but doubles down in Asia, Tokyo is being called on its position.

Japan was a major power in North-East Asia until the early seventeenth century. Then it largely turned its back on the world and expelled foreign merchants and missionaries. Its isolation was by no means total—it maintained relations with Qing China, Korea, with some of the neighbouring islands, and with Dutch merchants in the port of Nagasaki. But during the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), Japan was largely a spectator as the global and regional balance of power shifted. In the early nineteenth century, the country was shocked by China's defeat by Britain in the First Opium War. Then, in mid-June 1853, US Commodore Matthew Perry's four 'black ships' forced the Japanese—at the point of his guns—to open their country to international trade beyond the limited commercial relations

maintained with China and the Netherlands. Japan was initially yanked into the global system on Western terms.[1]

The forcible ‘opening’ of the country was followed by ‘unequal treaties’ with Russia, Britain, France, and other countries, giving those nations extraterritorial rights in Japan. In 1863, the Royal Navy bombarded the port of Kagoshima in the course of demanding compensation for the murder of a British merchant. A year later, there was a combined British, French, Dutch, and American attack on the forts on the Shimonoseki Straits separating Japan’s two main islands, Honshu and Kyushu. This was in response to attempts to expel foreigners. There was a general sense that the country was being pushed around and exploited, and that it would soon go the way of neighbouring China.

It was clear that if Japan wanted to survive it would have to modernise quickly. ‘What we must do’, Foreign Minister Kaoru Inouye announced, ‘is to transform our empire and our people, make the empire like the countries of Europe and our people like the peoples of Europe.’ As the writer, reformer, and founder of Keio University, Yukichi Fukuzawa, put it, the country would have to ‘leave Asia’. The slogan ‘Leave Asia, join Europe’ became widespread. This is what the Meiji Restoration of 1868 was designed to do. In a remarkably short period of time, Japan not only industrialised but built up a powerful navy and army. The country fast-tracked to Great Power status, defeating an ailing China in 1895, then mighty Russia in 1905, and annexing Korea in 1910. This expansion was justified in terms of classic geopolitics. ‘Korea’, Foreign Minister Jutaro Komura said in 1903, ‘is like a dagger pointing at Japan’s heart and she could never endure its possession by a foreign power.’[2]

Japan had joined Europe, a fact which was not without its ironies. ‘The average westerner’, the philosopher and art critic Kakuzo Okakura wrote, ‘was wont to regard Japan as barbarous while she indulged in the gentle arts of peace: he calls her civilised since she began to commit wholescale slaughter on [the] Manchurian battlefield.’ During the First World War, Japan was part of the winning Allied coalition, mopping up German colonies in China and the Pacific, and even deploying a squadron to the Mediterranean to support the British there. Afterwards, the Japanese joined the intervention against Bolshevik Russia.[3]

The other Great Powers accepted the rise of Japan, at least initially. The Anglo-Japanese alliance of 1902, which was largely directed against Russia, showed that for the British, at least, race was subordinated to strategic considerations. US President Theodore Roosevelt even described the Japanese as an ‘honorary white race’ at the time of the Russo-Japanese War, and there was a general view that they represented the progressive cause against Tsarist Russia. In 1919, Japan joined the Council of the League of Nations and was thus formally recognised as one of the main global ordering factors.[4]

Japan’s status was also a matter of doubt. At home, there were those, such as the writer Mori Ogai, who famously suggested, a few years before the First World War, that despite the veneer of progress, the country was ‘still under reconstruction’. Abroad, the fragility of the Japanese Great Power project was repeatedly exposed both symbolically and practically. In 1919, Japanese attempts to have the principle of racial equality incorporated in the League of Nations charter were rebuffed by the established powers. This rejection left a deep wound in the Japanese elite. ‘The white people—and the Anglo-Saxon race in particular’, the subsequent prime minister, Prince Konoye, wrote in 1919, ‘generally abhor coloured people.’[5]

Three years later, the Washington Naval Agreement of 1922, which institutionalised Japan’s numerical inferiority in warships, deepened this sense of discrimination, though some of the elite regarded the agreement as a success because it legitimised the country’s Pacific gains and entrenched its naval dominance over regional revivals. Japan also felt increasingly constrained by the American insistence that China ought not become a colony of Tokyo, but that her ‘door’ should remain ‘open’ to all trade.

Tokyo, of course, was no avatar of global racial equality. What Japan wanted was the right to its own colonies, in order to vindicate its ‘civilised’ status as an equal of the Western powers, and so as not to be colonised herself. The Japanese Empire was thus both an imperial and a decolonising project. Saving Japan from Western tutelage required, in Tokyo’s view, the subjection of the Asian peoples in its wider neighbourhood. Western objections to its domination of China grated, not only because they were hypocritical, but because they seemed to signal a determination to undermine Japan’s Great Power position.

During the 1920s and 1930s, Anglo-American alarm about Japan grew rapidly. The United States feared Tokyo's intentions in the Pacific, where the United States was present in the Philippines, Hawaii, and of course the western seaboard. Britain fretted about Japanese designs on its Far Eastern empire, which included Burma, Malaya and Singapore, and the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand. The Anglo-Japanese alliance was terminated partly because London saw less need for it, partly at US insistence, and partly on account of pressure from two of its dominions, Canada and Australia, among whom suspicion of Japanese intentions and fear of Japanese immigration were widespread; Australia, in particular, had been a vociferous opponent of the racial-equality clause.

The main problem was that Japan was critically short of raw materials to support its industries and armaments programmes; many of those materials were sourced from the United States, its most important trading partner. Japan imported more than 90 percent of the oil necessary to fuel its navy, army, and air force. The empire was also heavily dependent on food imports. Imperial Japan was, as Stanley Hornbeck, the chief of the US State Department's Division of Far Eastern Affairs, put it in 1934, one of the 'have-nots' of the world, destined to clash with the 'haves' like the United States. So long as the country had access to these resources through peaceful trade, all would be well, but the leadership in Tokyo fretted constantly about its vulnerability should the Western powers attempt to curtail Japanese imperial ambitions.[6]

Japan had studied the German experience of blockade in World War I closely, because it suffered from a similar dependency on food and raw material imports. Tokyo sought to address these deficiencies through autarchy, by means of territorial expansion into China in pursuit of its own 'living space', beginning with the occupation of Manchuria in 1931. This policy culminated in a full-scale assault on China in 1937, and the outbreak of a Sino-Japanese war which pitted Japan against the Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek and his Anglo-American backers. The war in China was accompanied by terrible Japanese human rights abuses, epitomised by the massacre of hundreds of thousands of civilians at Nanking as well as the sexual enslavement of Chinese and Korean women, the so-called comfort women.[7]

Throughout this period, there was a lively debate in Japan about what kind of Great Power it should be. Opinions divided about whether it should open up to the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ democracies or align more closely with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. There was also disagreement between those who argued that Japan was primarily a continental power, whose destiny lay on the mainland and whose main enemies were China and the Soviet Union, and those who were more focused on South-East Asia and the Pacific, and were most worried about the United States and the British Empire. These debates were largely geopolitical in nature, as most Japanese elites rejected both Western liberalism and European fascism in favour of a Japan-centred authoritarian imperialism rooted in the state religion of Shintoism and emperor worship.[8]

This discussion was accompanied by a shift in Japan’s geocultural positioning. Whereas previously it had cast itself as a European-style power in Asia, the empire now claimed to represent the continent and Asians against the predatory Western imperialists. In 1940, the Japanese foreign minister proclaimed a ‘Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere’ that included Manchuria, China, Korea, and much of South-East Asia. There were many Asian activists and intellectuals who were attracted to this vision, among them Sukarno in the Dutch East Indies, and Subhas Chandra Bose in the British Raj. The reality, though, was that Japanese behaviour was at least as exploitative as that of their European rivals. Japan continued to view itself as racially and civilisationally superior to other Asians, a view that obviously undermined the very solidarity it claimed to champion.

In December 1941, under pressure from an American oil embargo imposed in retaliation for its occupation of French Indochina and determined to break what they saw as the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ stranglehold in East Asia, the Japanese struck at Pearl Harbor. Within a few months, they had overrun Hong Kong, Singapore, the Philippines, and the Dutch East Indies. The intention was to create an autarchic bloc which would enable Tokyo to outlast the Allied counterattack and force Washington and London to negotiate a new settlement in the region. In May 1942, however, the Japanese carrier strike force was annihilated by the US Navy at the Battle of Midway. Over the next three years, Japan was steadily pushed back, and its cities were pummelled from the air. After the Americans dropped atomic

bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the Soviet Union attacked in Manchuria, the Japanese Empire surrendered unconditionally in August 1945. Its leaders were tried at Tokyo, and seven of them were executed.[9]

The Japan that emerged from the rubble was a much-reduced actor in world affairs; it enjoyed at best a conditional sovereignty. In Article 9 of its constitution, drafted by the Americans, the country abjured ‘war as a sovereign right of the nation and the threat or use of force as a means of settling international disputes’. Unlike Germany, Japan escaped partition, but it was forced to accept the Soviet occupation of the Kuril Islands. The country was completely dependent on American protection through the Security Treaty of 1951. It was not until 1954, with the establishment of the Self-Defence Forces (SDF), that Japan acquired any military capability at all, and then only a limited one. This was largely a result of American pressure after the Korean War made it imperative that Japan share the burden of containing communism in East Asia. In these circumstances, the dominant political figure of the time, Prime Minister Shigeru Yoshida, believed that the best strategy for Japan was to focus on its economy, to maintain the US alliance at all costs, and to eschew any military adventurism. This became known as the Yoshida Doctrine.

If Japan was officially ‘anti-militarist’, it was not pacifist, though much of its population was so in practice. The three principles of self-defence adopted by the Diet in 1954 stipulated that Japan would only act militarily if actually attacked, that it would only do so as a last resort, and that it would not use more force than strictly necessary. There were some Japanese who wanted their country to be more assertive and pushed back against what they regarded as a Western ‘guilt narrative’ designed to keep them in subjection. For example, Dr Masajiro Takigawa, author of the widely discussed book *A Trial of the Tokyo Trial* (1953), wrote that ‘Japan will not rise again as a fully-fledged nation-state so long as the people are obsessed that they are the “criminals of the world” who started a war of aggression’.[10]

The interwar debate over the nature of Japan and its positioning in the world was reprised as the country recovered in the 1950s and 1960s. Some, such as the celebrated writer Yukio Mishima, harked back to imperial glories and feared that the country might lose its soul to Western capitalism.

‘If things continue at this rate,’ he warned, ‘Japan will disappear… perhaps leaving behind an economic powerhouse in a corner of the Far East that is inorganic, empty, neutral-coloured, affluent, and shrewd.’ Others, such as the political scientist Masataka Kosaka, argued that Japan should be a British-style ‘maritime state’ in alignment with the West.[11]

Japan prospered under the American security umbrella. In 1964, the country showcased itself to the world by hosting the Summer Olympics. By 1968, Japan had overtaken West Germany to become the second largest economy in the world. Its Self-Defence Forces were among the most technologically sophisticated in the region. Despite this, the country remained militarily seriously underpowered in relation to its economic weight. In 1967, for example, the Japanese Diet announced that its space programme was for peaceful purposes only. In 1976, the defence budget was set to not exceed 1 percent of GDP.[12]

The precarious geopolitical position of Japan was underscored by the two Nixon *shokkus* (shocks) of 1971 and the Middle Eastern crisis of 1973. The first shokku happened when the US president made the surprise announcement that he would be visiting China the following year as part of a Sino-American rapprochement; the second was his unilateral devaluation of the dollar—the Japanese had not been consulted on that, either. Then, two years later, Japan suffered from its reliance on oil from the Middle East when the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), a cartel of oil producers, ramped up the price in order to try to force the West to reduce its support for Israel. All three events were seen in Tokyo as evidence of the dangers of being caught out by Great Power politics.

Though Japan was not taken seriously as a geopolitical actor, its economic heft was widely recognised. In 1973, the Trilateral Commission was set up to explore greater collaboration between the United States, Western Europe, and Japan, especially on economic matters. In 1975, the Japanese were invited to the inaugural meeting of the group of advanced economies which later evolved into the G7. The country became an ‘aid superpower’, and by 1989 it boasted the largest overseas aid budget in the world in terms of dollar disbursements, spending more than the United States and nearly three times as much as the United Kingdom.[13]

This support was often closely tied to commercial interests, especially in South-East Asia, where loans were frequently tied to Japanese contractors, and infrastructure projects boosted Japanese exports. Aid was thus not just given in the hope of generating international goodwill, but served as a tool of economic diplomacy and influence to increase regional dependence on Japanese capital and technology. One way or the other, forty years after being totally defeated, Japan had become an integral part of the management of the global system.

It was not long before many Americans and some Japanese began to see the two countries more as rivals than as partners. In 1979, the US sociologist Ezra Vogel published *Japan as Number One*, which predicted a forthcoming 'Japanese century'. Japanese confidence rose, as did irritation at American tutelage and the persistent reminders of Japanese war guilt in the region and more widely. Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, who dominated politics in the 1980s, originally wanted to revise the constitution and pursue a more independent security policy. The PRC renounced any claim to reparations during the normalisation period after Nixon's visit to China in 1972, but there were numerous spats between Japan and its neighbours over revisionist textbooks and visits by politicians, including Nakasone, to the Yasukuni shrine where some Japanese war criminals were interred. In the late 1980s, the minister for transport, Shintaro Ishihara, published a much-discussed book later translated as *The Japan That Can Say No: Why Japan Will Be the First Among Equals*.[14]

The continued growth of Japan's economy; its relentless purchase of icons of US culture and economy, such as Universal Studios and the Rockefeller Center in New York; and its growing political assertiveness soon led to a backlash. In 1985, Japan was the main target of the Plaza Accord by which countries agreed—in effect were forced—to appreciate their currencies against the dollar in order to make American exports more competitive. Two years later, some outraged members of Congress publicly smashed a selection of Japanese electronics on the Capitol Lawn.

That same year, in 1987, the New York property mogul Donald Trump published a blistering newspaper attack on Japan's allegedly unscrupulous commercial practices and failure to pay more for its own defence. A few years later, George Friedman and Meredith LeBard published *The Coming*

War with Japan, which warned of possible conflict within the following two decades. Shortly after that the new mood was captured by Michael Crichton's best-selling thriller *Rising Sun*, which explores the US-Japanese economic and cultural tensions of the era, and it was soon made into a Hollywood blockbuster. This escalating economic and political rivalry was symbolically important, but it did not much affect the security relationship between the United States and Japan, which remained close and focused on containing the Soviet Union in East Asia.

In the 1990s, Japan experienced two crises which dashed any prospect of its joining the ranks of the Great Powers in the foreseeable future. The first was short and painful. In 1990–1991, the country's elite was deeply embarrassed by its failure, and its inability, to provide any military assistance to the Western-led coalition against Saddam Hussein. The extensive financial and logistical support it provided instead—at $13 billion the largest non-military contribution of any country—was regarded by many as humiliating, and when Kuwait omitted Japan from its official expression of thanks, intentionally or unintentionally, the mortification was complete. Though the episode did little lasting damage to the country's defence relationship with the United States or to its broader diplomatic standing, it was still regarded as emblematic by Tokyo's elite of the mountain to be climbed if Great Power status were ever to be achieved once again.[15]

In response to this fiasco, Japan resumed its long-running debate about Article 9 of the constitution. This was re-interpreted to allow for new measures, such as the dispatch of minesweepers to the Persian Gulf in April 1991, to clear sea-lanes that were vital for the passage of Middle Eastern oil to Japan. Just over a year later, parliament approved an International Peace Cooperation Act enabling Japanese participation in UN peacekeeping operations. Not long after that, troops were sent on a UN mission to Cambodia, an important move psychologically, because Japanese forces had been deployed there during the Second World War. None of this, however, portended a resumption of Japanese leadership claims. On the contrary, Japan was largely sidelined during the major geopolitical controversies of the decade, such as those over the North Korean nuclear

programme and the Taiwan Strait. In 1993, Tokyo was shocked when North Korea test-fired one of its missiles over the Sea of Japan.

The second crisis was slow and agonising. In early 1991, as the Gulf War raged, the Japanese economic bubble burst. Despite numerous fiscal injections, the economy stubbornly refused to recover. In 1997, following a series of bank collapses, Japanese GDP actually shrank by a whole percentage point. There was a surge in the debt-to-GDP ratio—it had stood at 39 percent at the start of the 1990s, but increased to 131 percent by the middle of the following decade. Defence spending stagnated, and the country did not show the leadership many would have expected during the Asian financial crisis of 1997. The foreign aid budget, once the largest in the world, slipped to second place. Japan was still the second largest economy in the world, but the country no longer behaved like—or was regarded as—a rising Great Power.[16]

Instead, the country was widely seen as a ‘civilian power’, like Germany. With its prescribed anti-militarism and international engagement, Japan seemed to be intellectually and materially well-equipped to take advantage of the political, if not the economic, opportunities provided by globalisation. Its culture of peaceful dispute resolution and cooperation fitted well with the new mood. On this basis the Japanese elite hoped for a continuation of the old trilateralism with the United States and Europe under the protection of Pax Americana. The problem was that, unlike Germany at that point, Japan still lived in what was essentially a Cold War environment with at least one openly hostile actor, North Korea, in its immediate neighbourhood.[17]

During this period the Japanese leadership made sustained efforts to come to grips with its past. Resolving it was seen as key to Japan’s standing in the wider region and to its hopes of regaining Great Power status. In 1995, on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama expressed a ‘heartfelt apology’ for Japan’s ‘colonial rule and aggression’. That same year saw the establishment of the semi-official Asia Women’s Fund to pay compensation to women who had been sexually enslaved by the Japanese occupying forces; they also received a signed apology from the prime minister. Despite these efforts, Japan continued to suffer from what was termed ‘the history problem’.[18]

At the start of the new millennium, it looked as if Japan might have another chance to play a global role. In the autumn of 2000, a bipartisan report in the United States recommended that the victor of the presidential election should embrace Japan as an equal partner. One of its main authors, Richard Armitage, became deputy secretary of state in the George W. Bush administration. The new Japanese prime minister, Junichiro Koizumi, was keen to explore the possibilities. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, he sent Japanese naval forces to support US operations in the Indian Ocean as part of the campaign in Afghanistan. Japan also dispatched troops to defend reconstruction teams in Iraq.[19]

Hopes for a greater Japanese global role were derailed by a fresh round of controversy over the Second World War. The Korean government protested vigorously against new Japanese revisionist textbooks and Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni shrine, where war criminals were still interred, in April 2002 and again in August 2006. The disputes rumbled on throughout the decade.

Although the first decade of the new millennium was a time of relative stability in East Asia, there were already some signs of trouble ahead. Attempts to contain North Korea's nuclear programme failed, and in July 2006, a series of ballistic missile tests, followed by a nuclear test, showed just how extensive Pyongyang's capabilities were. If the PRC hardly featured as a threat around the year 2000, its phenomenal economic growth and escalating defence expenditure, which first surpassed that of Japan in 2001, began to unsettle the country as the decade ended. In 2010, the PRC became the second largest economy in the world, leaving Japan in third place. That same year, Beijing fired a shot across Tokyo's bow when it suspended the supply of critical metals needed for the production of computer parts, in retaliation for the Japanese detention of a Chinese fishing boat near the disputed Senkaku Islands. As the second decade of the twenty-first century dawned, Japan's geopolitical position was looking increasingly insecure, and there were few signs of the country returning to the ambitions and expectations of the 1980s.[20]

That was about to change, because in December 2012, Shinzo Abe was elected prime minister of Japan for the second time. His mission was nothing less than the re-establishment of the country's position as a Great

Power. In a book published just before his short first administration, *Towards a Beautiful Country / Utsukushii Kuni E* (2006), Abe had signalled his desire to create a strong state able to deal with external pressure based on the strengths to be found in the 'deep Japan'. This would be a nation 'respected and loved by the countries of the world'. Many Japanese had embraced Abe's vision, but others saw it as a dangerous route towards re-militarisation and war.[21]

Now Abe staked out Japan's claim to Great Power status yet again, although he never actually used that precise term. In February 2013, he announced in a speech in Washington that 'Japan is not, and will never, be a tier two country'. 'I consider it both my role and my fate to restore and enrich the power of the nation of Japan,' he told an audience at London's Guildhall four months later. In short, as Abe put it, 'I am back, and so shall Japan be.'[22]

Abe's domestic programme was driven by the desire to underpin the bid for Great Power status. His economic reforms—fiscal stimulus, loose monetary policy, and cuts to government expenditure (dubbed 'Abenomics')—were intended to escape the long stagnation. Abe increased the power of his Prime Ministerial Office in order to ensure the implantation of his policies. He also brought in a secrecy law to enable the construction of a national security state. In December 2013, Abe's government published Japan's first-ever National Security Strategy. It called for the country to 'play an even more proactive role as a major global player in the international community' and ensure that it had 'the power to take the lead in setting the international agenda'. It also demanded a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. In the following year, Abe established a Japanese National Security Council. The aspiration to become a Great Power in the American sense was clear for all to see.[23]

The historical legacy played an important role. Abe's grandfather, Kishi Nobusuke, had been minister of munitions in the wartime government and had vainly tried to restore Japan's Great Power position after 1945. Abe saw himself as picking up where Kishi had left off by carrying out nothing less than a second Meiji Restoration. Noting that the reformers of that time had believed in modernisation in order to 'become a country that is active in the world', Abe claimed that 'there is no reason that the Japanese people of

today cannot do what the Japanese people of Meiji could'. More controversially, Abe visited the Yasukuni shrine and spoke of the Tokyo trials as 'Victor's Justice', infuriating Korea and the PRC. He brushed off criticism from Washington with the suggestion that the presence of Confederate graves did not stop Americans from commemorating their dead at Arlington Cemetery. Abe relentlessly campaigned against what he called a 'masochistic' view of Japanese history that he said was holding back the country from embracing its Great Power destiny.[24]

That said, history was also a warning for Abe. In 2014, a hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War, he cautioned about the danger of sleepwalking into another global conflict. A year later, he expressed his fear that the world would retreat into economic blocs, just as it had done in the years leading up to the Second World War. 'With the Great Depression setting in and the Western countries launching economic blocs by involving colonial economies, Japan's economy suffered a major blow,' he argued. 'In such circumstances, Japan's sense of isolation deepened and it attempted to overcome its diplomatic and economic deadlock through the use of force.'[25]

Abe used his early economic successes to hail the revival of Japan as a serious global actor. 'Pundits used to say that Japan was at dusk or the land of the setting sun,' he told the World Economic Forum in January 2014, but, celebrating the country's return to growth, he claimed that 'it is not twilight but a new dawn that is breaking over Japan'. A year later, noting that 'our predecessors accomplished rapid economic growth, making Japan one of the greatest powers in the world', Abe expressed his 'determination' to 'make Japan a country that once again shines on the world centre stage'. 'Defeatism about Japan', he claimed in January 2019, 'is now defeated.'[26]

The re-establishment of Japan as a major player on the world stage is not just an elite vanity project designed to scratch an historical itch. There is a widespread belief across the political spectrum that the country needs to shape up if it wants to survive in North-East Asia, the world's most dangerous neighbourhood. The immediate threat is North Korea, which continues to develop and test nuclear weaponry on a regular basis, including a series of rocket firings in 2021–2023, some of which actually crossed Japanese territory.

From 2013, the Chinese challenge has escalated markedly. That year, the PRC announced its ‘One Belt One Road Initiative’, a massive infrastructural plan which threatened to turn much of the continent into a Chinese zone of influence. That same year a PRC frigate and a Japanese destroyer faced off near the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea. The PRC Air Force and Coast Guard became ever more aggressive. In 2016, Japanese fighter jets were forced to scramble no fewer than 851 times to intercept Chinese intruders, more than twice as often as only three years before. Tokyo was also unsettled by China’s increasingly violent threats against Taiwan.[27]

All this matters to Japan, not only because of the general sense of insecurity it evokes, but also because the country, which is host to important US military bases, will inevitably be dragged into any Sino-American armed conflict from the beginning. Moreover, as a trading nation, Japan is deeply vulnerable to threats to its supply chains and sea-lanes, the most important of which run through the South China Sea. If the connection to the Middle East were cut, Japan would quickly run out of oil.

At the global level, Japan fears being sidelined by the Great Powers, especially a Sino-American cartel. In the early years of Shinzo Abe’s second administration, the country was unsettled by talk of a world run by the ‘G2’, the United States and the PRC. These concerns have abated somewhat as Sino-American rivalry escalated, but Japan will always be on the lookout for any signs of a Nixon gambit repeating itself. This is why Tokyo reacted with such anxiety to reports in February 2025 that the second Trump administration might seek an accommodation with Xi’s China. It was also shocked by the tariffs imposed on Japan by Washington around the same time.

Finally, Japan still finds itself in the regional firing line over its handling of the past. Despite the growing need to collaborate with South Korea in security matters, the past ten years have demonstrated the continued saliency of the Japanese war record. In March 2013, then South Korean President Park Geun-hye announced that ‘the historic dynamic of one party being a perpetrator and the other party a victim will remain unchanged even after a thousand years have passed’. Six years later, in 2019, the speaker of the Parliamentary Assembly stated that the resolution of the ‘comfort

women' question required an apology from the Japanese emperor, (then) the son of the 'main culprit of war crimes'.[28]

Japan responded to these challenges with a forward policy indicative of its understanding of its increased role in the world. First, Abe made a determined effort to triangulate between Russia and the PRC. Although Japan joined the international sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, it sought to resolve the outstanding territorial issues with Russia amicably, and also finally to secure a peace agreement for the conflict started by the Soviet invasion of Manchuria in the dying days of World War II.[29]

Abe was also active on the historical front. The prime minister established an advisory panel on the history of the twentieth century and Japan's role in the world order in the twenty-first century. He sought to learn from the country's experience in its global context. Abe himself used the 70th anniversary of the Japanese surrender in 2015 to frame the period of aggression and defeat as an aberration. Three years later, by contrast, he embraced the 150th anniversary of the Meiji Restoration as an opportunity to show that Japan had reconnected with the modernising Western part of its past.[30]

Nowhere was this Western framing more evident than in Abe's promotion of the concept of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', a term he coined, which was later adopted as official American strategy by the Trump administration, and has now entered the global discourse. As Abe told the US Congress in April 2015, 'We must make the vast seas stretching from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean seas of peace and freedom where all follow the rule of law.' He brushed aside objections from protectionist, especially agricultural, lobbies at home to announce that he would join the projected Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a free trade agreement between eleven countries in the Asia-Pacific. When this idea fell foul of the United States, Japan was part of the newly launched Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), a multilateral trade agreement which included most of the TPP members, with the significant exception of the United States, and also the United Kingdom, in March 2018.[31]

Japan also sought closer collaboration within its neighbourhood. Abe reanimated the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) with Australia, India, and the United States which he had initiated during his first administration. In 2017, he called upon the four ‘sea-faring democracies’ to take the lead in preserving common goods, and especially the safety of the trade routes in the region. Soon this collaboration—a partnership rather than a formal alliance—was extended to include Britain, which became more focused on East Asia. Japan was positioning itself within the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ and ‘maritime’ camp it had belonged to for the first fifty years after the Meiji Restoration and with which it had subsequently fallen out so fatefully.

All of this was intended to contain China, not to exclude it. Despite his concerns about Chinese strategic intentions, Abe was a passionate believer in trade with the PRC, and therefore opposed American plans to decouple from China. He encouraged Chinese tourism, and economic integration between the two countries reached previously unheard-of levels. Likewise, whatever differences there were with Moscow over the Northern Territories, Abe hoped to benefit from a cheap and reliable supply of Russian oil and gas.

Despite all these efforts, the international situation of Japan has worsened. In September 2020, the Russian parliament passed an amendment to the constitution forbidding territorial concessions. Negotiations over the Northern Territories were terminated. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Japan has feared Russian intentions to its west and north. When Japan signed up to new sanctions against Russia, Moscow broke off discussions over the peace treaty. Although a rapprochement with Russia seemed possible ten years earlier, that nation is now a potential adversary.

The invasion of Ukraine also had implications for the relationship with the PRC. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida spoke of a ‘moment of truth’. The violation of international law could prove contagious and constituted a threat to the stability of Eurasia. Kishida feared that Putin’s example might inspire Xi Jinping to attack Taiwan. ‘Ukraine today’, Kishida remarked in Singapore in June 2022, ‘may be East Asia tomorrow.’ Ukraine might be far away, but its reverberations were close. Increasingly, Japan is viewing the contests between Russia and the West and the confrontation with Xi’s China as one battle space.

In response, Tokyo is deepening collaboration with European countries. Kishida launched the Combat Air Programme with Britain and Italy in December 2022. In the following year, he concluded the Hiroshima Accords, a bilateral defence, trade, investment, and technology transfer agreement with the United Kingdom. Japan also sent extensive economic aid to Ukraine. Japan's revised National Security Strategy, issued in December 2022, and its National Defence Strategy and Defence Buildup Programme each reflected the new priorities. They emphasised semiconductors, rare earths, and supply chains and aligned industrial policy with strategic competition, particularly with regard to China. Taken together, these measures constitute a credible plan to provide Japan with the conventional military means to support a Great Power role.

The National Security Strategy noted the 'intensifying geopolitical competition' across the world and the fact that 'globalization and interdependence alone' could not secure peace. It also lamented that some countries 'not sharing universal values'—here North Korea, the PRC, and Russia were singled out—were not only trying 'to revise the existing international order' but closely collaborating in that endeavour. In this context, Japan emphasised its determination to become a 'major global actor', to 'take primary responsibility' for its own defence within five years, to mount 'counter-strikes against ballistic missile attacks', and to 'disrupt and defeat invasions much earlier and at a further distance' than hitherto within ten years.

These were major new departures and they were accompanied by plans to deliver the necessary capabilities. In 2022, Japan announced its intention to raise military expenditure by nearly 60 percent over the following five years. Taking coastguard and other paramilitary spending into account, Japan will soon probably commit about 2 percent of GDP to defence. If these plans are implemented, then by the end of the decade it could be transformed from the ninth highest global spender on defence to the third highest, behind only the United States and the PRC.

Flanking all this is a programme for refounding Japanese society and politics under the primacy of foreign policy. The 'Grand Design and Action Plan for a New Form of Capitalism', first presented in June 2022 and revised a year later, was designed to address two major interconnected challenges. First, it argued that neoliberalism, despite its role in 'driving

growth', was not enough to 'ensure the health of citizens or the economic security of the nation'. Second, it suggested that the Russian invasion of Ukraine had 'revealed geopolitical risks to the international economy and… challenges from authoritarian states'. For this reason, the 'Action Plan' proposed measures to secure Japan's access to food, supply chains, and energy provision.[32]

The resources available to sustain Japan's role in the world are considerable. It has been the second or third largest economy in the world for about sixty years, slipping to fourth place, behind Germany, in 2024. Japan's currency, the yen, is one of the five leading currencies in the world, alongside the American dollar, the Chinese yuan, the euro, and the pound sterling. With a population of 125 million people, Japan is the second largest developed country in the world behind the United States. In December 2023, the Japanese cabinet approved the country's largest ever defence budget. Its industries are capable of producing armaments in almost all categories, including small arms, artillery, armoured vehicles, aircraft, ships, and submarines. Japan's self-defence forces now even have two small aircraft carriers, one of them, the *Kaga*, bearing the same name as the one sunk at Midway. The *Soryu*-class submarines, of which there are now twelve, are also named after a ship which went down in that battle. To some, the appellations indicate the country's renewed Great Power ambitions.

Despite these strengths, Japan suffers from severe structural problems which inhibit its ability to act on the international scene. Economic growth has been sluggish for a generation, with real incomes stagnating for about thirty years, and after a brief surge under Abe, the country went into recession in 2023–2024. The yen has fallen considerably in value. Another, even more serious, problem is the declining birthrate. In 2022, the country had fewer than eight hundred thousand babies; fifty years earlier, it had more than two million a year. Nearly 30 percent of Japanese are aged sixty-five or over, the highest proportion in the world (after tiny Monaco). Projections suggest that the population will fall to fifty-three million by the end of the century unless the government resorts to immigration, which historically it has been very reluctant to do. In January 2023, Prime

Minister Kishida warned parliament that the question of ‘children and child-rearing’ was ‘an issue that cannot wait’, and that the country was ‘standing on the verge of whether we can continue to function as a society’.[33]

Moreover, Japan lacks some of the basic requirements for Great Power status. Despite recent increases, the country is still only the tenth largest spender on defence. The 1.4 percent of GDP allocated to defence in 2024, by far the lowest of all the countries with serious Great Power aspirations, suggests that Japan is still not fully committed to dealing with threats in its neighbourhood. Finally, Japan lacks nuclear weapons capability, a key requirement for Great Power status. The issue here is not the know-how, because Japan certainly has the expertise to develop such a capacity at short notice. Rather, the acquisition of nuclear weapons would break a powerful domestic taboo and represent a massive breach of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime. At the moment, the country’s civilian nuclear facilities are under twenty-four-hour supervision by the International Atomic Energy Agency to ensure that materials are not used for non-peaceful purposes.

Furthermore, Japan does not yet have the military reach one would normally associate with Great Power status. On the eve of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the country was in occupation of much of China, as well as all of French Indochina, and had bases across the Pacific in places such as Truk and the Marshall Islands. Today, Japan has only one overseas base, an anti-piracy facility in Djibouti, which was built in 2011. The reach of the Japanese Navy and Air Force of today is thus much more limited than the old carrier striking force of imperial times. Until recently, its military focus —aside from peacekeeping—was almost entirely on homeland defence in its immediate neighbourhood.[34]

But that is now changing. Japan is investing heavily in next-generation military technologies such as space-based surveillance, cyber defences, hypersonic interceptors, AI, and drone swarms. Despite this, the country remains heavily dependent on the United States in the intelligence and cyber spheres as in most others. Japan has also recently concluded agreements on access and operational cooperation with Australia, the Philippines, India, and the United Kingdom.[35]

In reputational terms, Japan is much more of a world leader. The country is regularly ranked among the top three or four soft-power leaders globally, and usually as the first in Asia. Despite the country's grim World War II record, which remains an enduring reputational challenge, it seems to enjoy the highest trust factor in the region. It is a 'discreet leader'. Next to the United States and Russia, Japan is the power most respected, or feared, by the People's Republic of China. Importantly, with Abe's promulgation of the doctrine of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', the country now stands for a broader principle in the world. It is the Asian avatar of the rules-based liberal international order and thus an important part of the Western 'pole'.[36]

But Japan's reputational strengths are also a brake on its Great Power status. Despite the exhortation of leaders such as Abe, the wider population simply lacks—for historical reasons—the ambition to take on greater responsibilities. Its armed forces have not fired a shot in anger since 1945.

With respect to resilience, the picture is mixed. On the one hand, Japanese society and politics have long been extraordinarily stable. Their very high degree of cohesion suggests that the country would be capable of carrying on a long struggle even under adverse circumstances. On the other hand, Japan suffers from a certain brittleness on account of the lost war and the divided memory it has produced. Wide swathes of the population are, if not pacifistic, then at least so anti-militarist as to rule out any use of force beyond strict self-defence. Japan has not been tested since the Second World War, and so its resilience involves more guesswork than usual, but it is likely that while the country might struggle to 'dish it out', it can probably 'take it'.

Despite its growing military expenditure and increased strategic engagement in Asia and across the world, Japan has not yet recovered the Great Power status it lost at the end of the Second World War. As the world's third or fourth largest economy today, it certainly has the economic heft, industrial base, and expertise to sustain such a role. Japan is also in the process of acquiring impressive conventional military reach. But the barriers to seeking the nuclear weapons capability necessary for Great Power status remain strong for now, and so do the cultural restraints holding

Japan back more generally. Much of the country simply does not want to become a Great Power, and much of its neighbourhood does not want it either. If Japan is to overcome these obstacles, it will have to come to terms with the past. Nor has the country found a solution to its demographic crisis. It cannot, as Martin Wolf once said, simply ‘print babies’. For all these reasons, Japan as a Great Power remains very much ‘under reconstruction’.[37]

Six

The Travails of France

THE IDEA OF France as a nation has always been tied up with being a Great Power. ‘France’, as the wartime leader and subsequent president Charles de Gaulle memorably put it, ‘cannot be France without grandeur.’ The French see their country as a distinct pole in a multipolar world and understand it as representing the principle of geopolitical ‘difference’. History has thus been a propellant, but it is a warning, too, given France’s past traumas, which are not really past. Repeated defeats at the hands of Britain and then Germany have left deep scars, which France has bound up with European bandages. The country is a demonstration not only of the importance of self-worth and positioning in Great Power politics, but also of their limitations as aspiration comes up against reality. In recent years, in fact, France has struggled to assert its position in the face of German power in Europe, ‘Anglo-Saxon’ collusion globally, Russian revanchism, and Chinese economic growth. ‘Mirror, Mirror on the wall,’ one respected French expert pointedly asks, ‘are we still a Great Power at all?’[1]

France is, or was, one of the oldest Great Powers. Originally part of Charlemagne’s realm, it emerged as a separate entity from the Holy Roman Empire during the Middle Ages, refusing to acknowledge the authority of the emperor. In the mid-fifteenth century, France finally cast off English domination to become one of the first European nation-states, albeit with many powerful provincial identities and feudal autonomies. For the next two hundred years or so, the country battled the Habsburgs for supremacy on the continent. It fretted about ‘encirclement’ by the Austro-Spanish dynastic alliance which lay not only to the south, on the other side of the

Pyrenees, but also to the south-east, in Northern Italy; to the east, in the Free County of Burgundy; and to the north, in what is today Belgium.

By the end of the eighteenth century, France had broken out of this ring. It did so by repeatedly intervening in Germany and by securing alliances in Eastern Europe, the *barrière de l'Est*, designed to hem in the Habsburgs and to keep out the Russians. It also established itself as a formidable colonial power in North America, the Caribbean, and parts of Asia. Admittedly, France was less successful against Britain, which inflicted a series of humiliating reverses in Europe and overseas, perpetuating a rivalry which endures to this day. During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, France seemed poised to dominate the whole continent. Napoleon claimed the mantle of Charlemagne and crowned himself emperor. His legal reform, the Napoleonic Code, was imposed upon or adopted by large parts of Europe. The Continental System was intended to provide an economic framework for the whole of Europe, while the Continental Blockade sought to exclude Britain from European markets. In 1812, French armies even reached Moscow.

During this period, France was not merely—in current parlance—a 'hard-power' giant, but also boasted formidable 'soft power'. French culture dominated Europe, and the French language was widely used for correspondence among educated people and in diplomatic dispatches between capitals. During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era, France cast itself—and was accepted by many—as the unique *Grande Nation*, destined to spread the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity to its fellow Europeans, whether they wanted them or not.

In 1812–1815, after shattering defeats in Russia, at Leipzig, and at Waterloo, French power was contained. The Vienna Settlement of 1815 was designed to prevent France from ever mounting such a challenge again, by hemming it in through an expanded Prussia to the east along with the new United Kingdom of the Netherlands to the north. Although the country rapidly regained its Great Power status and remained a major factor throughout this period—for example, in Germany, in Italy, and during the Crimean War—it was clear by the late nineteenth century that demographic and economic weaknesses were threatening a relative decline. After the catastrophic defeat at the hands of Prussia in 1871 and the establishment of the Second German Empire, France under Prime Minister Jules Ferry

sought to compensate for its European losses by building up an overseas empire in Africa and Asia.

Despite these efforts, France had lost ground by the early twentieth century. It was no longer the first or second power on the continent but clearly fourth in line after Germany, Britain, and Russia. Worse still, Italy was snapping at its heels, especially in North Africa. France sought safety in alliances, and in 1914 went to war against Germany and Austria-Hungary with the support of Russia and the British Empire. The country played a major role during the First World War, but only survived by the skin of its teeth. In 1917, the French army mutinied, and in 1918 it was on the verge of being swamped by the German offensive before it was rescued by the Anglo-Americans.

Even though France was a key player in the subsequent Versailles settlement, it remained wracked by insecurity about the revival of German power. Superficially, the country was dominant, with an empire enlarged with mandates seized from Germany and a seat on the Council of the League of Nations. France was also the recipient of reparations payments from Germany. Despite this, the massive casualties of World War I, the continuing demographic decline, the sense of being left behind by the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, and the constant fear of German revanchism made the elite deeply insecure.

This sense of inferiority was aggravated by the experience of World War II. First, France was suddenly and unexpectedly overrun by Germany in 1940. It rejected Winston Churchill’s dramatic offer of an Anglo-French ‘Union’. Then the British destroyed much of the French fleet at Oran in order to prevent it from falling into Hitler’s hands, and bitterness about this act of ‘perfidy’ lingered long after the end of hostilities. Worse still, de Gaulle, the Free French leader, was bluntly told that same year—1940—by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s confidant Harry Hopkins, that France no longer mattered. The president effectively wrote off the country, which was not included alongside the United States, the United Kingdom, the Soviet Union, and China in his 1942 ‘Four Policemen’ concept. Stalin tended to agree. De Gaulle was pointedly not invited to the Yalta or Potsdam conferences at which the fate of Europe was decided.[2]

The French leader fought hard to assert himself, largely by ‘kicking up dust’, as he put it. A big part of his strategy was postwar control of the overseas empire, which the general regarded as essential to the recovery of France’s international status. ‘Without an Empire,’ the radical politician (and later president of the Senate) Gaston Monnerville remarked, ‘France would simply be a liberated country. Thanks to its empire it is a conquering country.’ It was only thanks to Churchill, though, that France was able to regain at least part of its former position. He insisted that de Gaulle be given a zone of occupation in Germany and a permanent seat on the new United Nations Security Council. The France that emerged from the Second World War was thus a Great Power resurrected by the British, something the French have never forgiven.[3]

After liberation, France faked it until it could make it. The attempt to retain its formal empire to support French Great Power ambitions failed miserably. A joint Franco-British operation to prevent the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956 was militarily successful but politically disastrous. France was painfully ejected first from Indochina and then from Algeria. This prompted the French political philosopher Raymond Aron to remark that ‘France needs reality therapy. It can no longer act the part of a Great Power and the Algerian drama merely marks French passage from a world to a continental power.’ By the late 1960s, most of the former French colonial empire had become at least notionally independent.[4]

Despite this, France retained extensive informal influence in what came to be known as *Francafrique*, and also on bases and territories across the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, giving Paris a global reach. France also played an important role in Europe, where it was an occupying power in Germany. It tested its own independent nuclear deterrent in 1960, the *force de frappe*, later rechristened the *force de dissuasion*. In general, the dynamics of the Cold War, in which Washington needed French military and diplomatic cooperation, helped the standing of the country.

Still, France suffered acute status anxieties. It felt threatened by the revival of West Germany, especially in economic terms. France also worried about being marginalised by the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ culturally, economically, and geopolitically. It insisted on equality not merely with the United Kingdom but also the United States. After Suez, when President

Dwight D. Eisenhower forced the Anglo-French-Israeli coalition to withdraw from Egypt, Paris resolved never to trust the Americans again. Unlike Britain, France saw itself as an alternative pole not just to the Soviet Union but also the United States.

France's response was twofold. First, it claimed an exceptional role in the world. De Gaulle famously invoked 'a certain idea of France' as a country 'ordained for an eminent and exceptional destiny' in which France 'is not really herself unless she is in the front row'. In this spirit, France cast itself as an alternative to German influence in Europe and to 'Anglo-Saxon' domination globally. It represented the principle of 'difference' in the world. But de Gaulle's 1961 demand for a 'Global Directorate' consisting of the United States, Britain, and France was rejected by Washington and received with little enthusiasm in London. In 1966, partly in reaction to this snub, de Gaulle took France out of NATO's Integrated Command Structure, resulting in the move of the alliance's headquarters from Fontainebleau in France to Mons in Belgium.[5]

Second, France sought to harness the growing movement for European integration to its Great Power ambitions. The European Economic Community, of which France was a founding member, created in 1957, was seen as an instrument to keep Germany contained within Western Europe and to keep the Soviet Union, the United States, and the United Kingdom out. But it also served as a vehicle for partnership with Germany. In the same month, January 1963, de Gaulle pronounced his infamous 'non' to Britain's application to join the EEC and concluded the Élysée Treaty of Friendship with Germany. The general regarded the United Kingdom as a Trojan horse for American influence and also feared that its entry would challenge French leadership in Europe. When the United Kingdom was finally admitted to the EEC in 1973, it was only after France had approved this through a national referendum, the only country to hold such an exercise.

At the same time, French support for 'Europe' was intergovernmental, not supranational. France had no intention of giving up its sovereignty; as far back as 1954, it had been the National Assembly in Paris which had torpedoed the plan for a European Defence Community. France, as one wag remarked, wanted a European army for the Germans but a French army for

France. In 1961, de Gaulle proposed a closer intergovernmental union known as the Fouchet Plan, but the idea did not appeal to the other five members of the EEC. Five years later, in 1966, France secured the ‘Luxemburg Compromise’, which ensured that—de facto—decisions within the EEC required unanimity, giving France a veto.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, France remained anxious about the growth of the German economy, and in particular about the mighty Deutschmark, which was widely described as Germany’s nuclear weapon. These concerns deepened with the end of the Cold War. With the absorption of the former communist German Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic was now economically and demographically much larger than France. Germany’s support of Slovenian and Croatian independence in 1991, over strong French objections, seemed a portent of things to come. Right at end of the decade, the vice president of the Franco-German conglomerate Airbus, Philippe Delmas, even spoke—hyperbolically—about ‘the next war with Germany’.[6]

Despite, or rather because of, these anxieties, France deepened its cooperation and partnership with Germany through Europe. The two countries united to form the Eurocorps, a six-nation multilateral military force, in 1992. That same year, they were the main drivers of the Maastricht Treaty, which laid the groundwork for the European common currency and strengthened the powers of the European Parliament and foreign policy and security cooperation. Throughout this period, the Franco-German partnership was ritually invoked by both countries as the ‘engine’ or ‘motor’ of European integration.

Meanwhile, France’s global position weakened. In the post–Cold War world, its nuclear deterrent was devalued, and the nation seemed badly configured to cope with the new era of globalisation dominated by the United States. Hubert Védrine, who was foreign minister in the late 1990s, described America as a ‘hyperpower’, a term that resonated around the world. Paris also fretted that London might steal a march in Africa, where it interpreted the response to the Rwandan genocide as part of an ‘Anglo-Saxon plot’ to supplant French influence in that part of the world. The Anglo-American invasion of Iraq in 2003, a plan passionately denounced shortly beforehand at the United Nations by French Foreign Minister

Dominique de Villepin, heightened these fears. That same year, the economist Nicolas Baverez published a best-selling book with the self-explanatory title *France in Decline*.[7]

During these two decades, France asserted its Great Power status and rejection of unipolarity at every turn. When committing France to the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, President François Mitterrand stated that this was because France was 'one of the great world powers and must be worthy of her obligations'. His successor, Jacques Chirac, stated five years later that he wanted France to 'contribute to the emergence of a multipolar world'. This was largely intended to balance not Russia or China but the United States.[8]

Paris pursued this vision on two main fronts: through traditional diplomacy, and via 'Europe'. Defence relations with Britain were deepened through the Saint-Malo (1998) and Lancaster House (2010) agreements. France joined with Russia and Germany to oppose the American-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Chirac's successor, Nicolas Sarkozy, tilted back towards the United States in 2009, when he took France back into the NATO Military Command structure, announcing that the country had rejoined the 'western family'. But the main vehicle for the assertion of French Great Power was the European Union, which served as both a shield and a force multiplier. The Deutschmark, 'Germany's nuclear weapon', was decommissioned through the introduction of the euro, which entered circulation in 2002. France took the lead in establishing the European Common Security and Defence Policy.[9]

This strategy was not without its critics in France. In the early 1990s, during the debates on the Maastricht Treaty, a group of Gaullist senators protested to the Constitutional Court. 'If sovereignty is no longer anything but an addition of competences,' they asked, 'if one can successfully remove them as one would the leaves of an artichoke, at what point, or at what degree, do we arrive at the heart?'[10]

France, of course, had always been deeply hostile to the idea of supranational integration. Europe was meant to exalt—not transcend—France. At key moments in history, the country had rejected the idea of merging its sovereignty into a larger political union: in 1940, when offered by Churchill; in 1954, over the European Defence Community; and in the

referendum on the European Constitution in 2005. Monetary union was not accompanied by political union. There would be a European currency for Germany and the other Eurozone members, but France would retain, or so it thought, its independent role in the world.

This strategy was severely tested by the onset of the global financial and euro debt crises in 2008. France lost economic competitiveness, dropping by seven points in the World Economic Forum Index in the subsequent five years. The German economy, by contrast, quickly dusted itself off and powered ahead. Politically, too, France lost ground. If at the start of the crisis Europe had been led by a duo of Germany's Angela Merkel and France's Nicolas Sarkozy—dubbed 'Merkozy'—the balance of power shifted more and more towards Berlin, which held the fiscal whip hand. Many in Paris felt that the euro, far from weakening German influence, actually strengthened it, as the European Central Bank largely reflected Berlin's preferences, and Germany played the dominant role in setting bailout conditions for EU countries needing assistance.[11]

The French fear of relegation had returned in force, and it was aggravated by a sense of crisis in domestic politics. The far right, which first made a breakthrough in the 2002 presidential election, became a yeast which rose steadily during the first twenty years or so of the new millennium. It was accompanied by the growth of a far-left nationalist politics, epitomised by the charismatic Jean-Luc Mélenchon. A popular backlash against the perception of German-imposed austerity after the 2008 financial crisis further fuelled populism. The elections of the centre-right presidents Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 and his centre-left rival François Hollande in 2012 did little to change the narrative of decline. In 2016, the term 'declinism'—*declinisme*—even entered the *Larousse* dictionary. As the second decade of the twenty-first century wore on, France seemed to be adrift, in Europe and in the world.

What France took from this history was a determination to play, as de Gaulle had put it, a global role 'in all directions'. The country was present on most continents, and it was a powerful factor particularly in Africa, where its zone of influence was seen as part of France's broader Great Power posture. In Europe, Paris worried about the growth of German geo-economic power. Neither Russia nor the PRC had yet emerged as major

threats. France's principal concern was to preserve multipolarity and to ensure that the country's standing never declined to such an extent that its status as an independent pole was put in doubt.

The main challenge to the concept of multipolarity, and thus to the French claim to 'difference' or 'exception', was seen to come from the 'Anglo-Saxons'. The Americans were feared because of their supposed hegemonic ambitions and obvious capabilities. The British were regarded with suspicion, because their alleged fealty to Washington meant that they misconstrued their role in the global pecking order, which the French believed was just below that of France, and because London was supposedly in denial about its true interests, which allegedly lay in Europe.[12]

In fact, part of France's Great Powerness was constructed, consciously and unconsciously, in differentiation from that of the United Kingdom. Whereas, after Suez, Britain had concluded that the United States should never be crossed, the French drew the lesson that the United States could never be trusted. If the British argued that the European Union was merely a vehicle for German control of the continent, the French claimed that the only way to stop the domination of the Federal Republic was by embedding it in the EU. The trick was to diminish German sovereignty while enhancing French sovereignty. For this reason, Paris could never quite work out whether France itself was a separate pole or only played that role as part of the EU.

The France of today clearly sees itself as a Great Power, both in Europe and more broadly. In August 2019, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian argued not only that his country 'must remain the driving force' in the defence of the continent but that 'by its history and status, France must take the initiative' to act as 'a balancing power'. A few months later President Emmanuel Macron echoed his words when he referred to the country as a 'balancing power'. 'I think it is France's role', Macron stated during a remarkable interview for *The Economist*, 'as a permanent member of the Security Council, a nuclear power, founding member of the European Union, a country which is present through its overseas territories on every

continent and which remains very present because of the French-speaking world. We have unparalleled reach.'[13]

Unlike the United Kingdom, which has always been in partnership with the United States and the West more broadly, France—to quote the words of its Strategic Review in 2022—'refuses to be locked into bloc geopolitics'. Despite its insistence on multipolarity, France has not been an advocate for the claims of the 'Global South', but quite the opposite. The eminent French international relations expert Bertrand Badie pointed out that this was because the country was obsessed with its 'rank' in the world and viewed the rising powers 'like an old aristocrat who's now forced to dine next to a peasant who has become rich, and he finds that unbearable'.[14]

Over the past fifteen years or so, France has grappled with a growing set of challenges. At the global level, the country was a dutiful member of the rules-based international order, largely supportive of globalisation, climate change mitigation, and the fight against illegal migration and terrorism. In all this, France wanted to preserve the sovereignty, difference, and balance which would enable the country to act as a separate 'pole' in equilibrium with the United States, Russia, and the PRC. The French also wanted to show their value to the United States as an alliance partner to keep it engaged in the defence of Europe and European concerns in the Middle East.[15]

It was at the regional level, though, that French preoccupations were most keenly felt. Europe, of course, was the important arena. The European sovereign debt in 2010–2013 threatened core French interests: first, because the possible collapse of the Eurozone endangered the stability of heavily indebted countries like France; second, because the course of events steadily strengthened German influence in a Union which had been designed—in part—to contain it. Third, there were the intertwined threats of illegal migration and terrorism, the latter epitomised by major attacks in Paris in 2015 and Nice in 2016, and many other atrocities. Fourth, and at this time very much last, there was the issue of how to respond to the growing challenge from Vladimir Putin in the east of Europe.

Some of these problems straddled the foreign and domestic spheres. The inability to police the external boundary of the European Union meant that

France, which was a member of the Schengen passportless travel area, had little control over access to its territory. A number of the terrorists who attacked targets in Paris, for example, were able to enter illegally from the Middle East. The resulting tensions around immigration in French society were then weaponised by far-right parties and Russia, which sought to undermine the cohesion of the EU and its member states wherever it could.[16]

In the wider European neighbourhood, France was determined to secure its position in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East. There it saw its traditional interests in Libya, where it had intervened in 2011 together with the British; in the energy resources near Cyprus that were challenged by Turkey; and in Lebanon, challenged by Syria and Russia. Beyond this, France supported the international campaign against the Islamic State. More generally, of course, Paris was keen to try to prevent terrorism in the region from spilling over into Europe and then France itself.

France was also concerned by developments in the northern half of sub-Saharan Africa. There was general agreement that the traditional 'sphere of influence' policy in *Francafrique* had run its course, not least because of resistance within many of the African states themselves to what was widely seen as French neocolonialism. Moreover, some states, such as Mali, were becoming increasingly ungovernable and appeared on the verge of being taken over by Islamist terrorists who would then use the area as a staging ground for attacks on Europe. In 2013, the French Ministry of Defence issued a 'white book' postulating an 'arc of crisis' running from the Atlantic to the Indian Oceans that France and Europe would have to contain.[17]

France had a considerable stake in the Indo-Pacific, which not only generated much of world trade, but was also fast becoming a site of Great Power contestation. The purpose of French engagement in the region, Admiral Jean Dufourcq explained in 2012, was to 'preserve the maritime flow, and therefore the economic flow, which connects Shanghai to Rotterdam'. The defence of the sea-lanes would, he continued, maintain 'the freedom of navigation of this waterway' and 'the balance of power of the countries bordering the Indian Ocean' and improve 'the prospects of a real cooperation for the Indian Ocean's development'.[18]

The Indo-Pacific region was also home to important French overseas territories (with about 1.5 million citizens) and bases, such as Djibouti on the Indian Ocean and Polynesia. Furthermore, there were substantial French military deployments, including more than five thousand troops, dozens of aircraft, and a substantial proportion of the navy. Beyond this, Paris wanted to maintain good relations with partners such as India, Japan, and Australia and to avoid getting caught up in any Sino-American antagonism—for example, over Taiwan or the South China Sea. Here the US 'pivot' to Asia, announced under Obama and intensified by his successors, was both a challenge and an opportunity to stake out a distinctive French position, however symbolic.

François Hollande, who was elected president in 2012, sought to respond to these challenges. He tried to assert French interests in the Eurozone more effectively than Sarkozy had been able to do in his final years in office. In 2013, the president sent a substantial force into Mali—called Operation Serval—to deal with the Islamist threat there. A year later this was expanded into a much larger venture—Operation Barkhane—covering Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad as well. Compared to his predecessors, he tried to engage more with African populations and to privilege democracies over dictatorships. In the Middle East, he was a prominent supporter of punishing Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad for his use of chemical weapons, until the planned operation was abandoned by the British and Americans in August 2013.[19]

With respect to Eastern Europe, Hollande reacted to the 2014 annexation of Crimea by halting the sale of two *Mistral*-class helicopter carriers to Russia. Together with Germany, he tried to mediate a peace between Kiev and Moscow through the Minsk process. In 2016, the French concluded a major agreement to supply diesel-powered submarines to Australia, winning the contract over German and Japanese competitors. France, in other words, was by no means passive during this period.

Despite this, by early 2017 Hollande was hopelessly bogged down. Despite his labour law reforms and pro-business measures, the French economy was falling ever further behind that of Germany; all attempts at reform failed. In April 2017, Hollande's former economics minister, Emmanuel Macron, described the German trade surpluses as

‘unsupportable’. Though the situation in the Eurozone was stabilised by the end of 2015, with the resolution of the Greek crisis, when Athens adopted a package of reforms in return for additional bailout funds, the British vote to leave the European Union the following year both endangered the EU’s cohesion and raised the question of what role the United Kingdom should henceforth play in the ordering of the continent.[20]

Things were little better abroad. In Mali, after initial successes, French troops were being dragged deeper and deeper into the morass. In 2017 the PRC set up a naval support base in Djibouti, right in France’s sphere of influence there. Towards the end of the year, France was shocked by the election of Donald Trump to his first term as president of the United States. At home, society seethed under the impact of economic stagnation, illegal immigration, and continued terrorist attacks.

This was the moment when Emmanuel Macron captured the French presidency. He articulated a new Great Power project for France and for ‘Europe’. French greatness would be restored through a programme of domestic reform and renewal, which in turn would inspire the regeneration of the embattled European Union. In particular, these reforms would enable Macron to ‘get his own house in order’ and thus put him in a better position to enlist German support for his plans for the transformation of the EU. The president waited until after Chancellor Merkel’s third election victory in September 2017 to present his comprehensive plan for Europe. In January 2018, he even addressed the peoples of Europe directly, calling upon them to take part in ‘citizens consultations to tell us what Europe you want’, the first time a head of government had ever issued such a transnational appeal.[21]

Macron envisaged a Eurozone which would have a joint budget, with increased investment to boost ailing economies. There would be a Eurozone finance minister and a Eurozone parliament. Member-state corporation taxes would be harmonised, an EU-wide carbon tax would be introduced, and the American tech giants would be regulated. Travel and migration would come under centralised control. Macron framed all this as the creation of a European sovereignty which would ‘protect’ that of the member states. His vision amounted to nothing less than a Eurozone

government to balance not only the PRC but also Donald Trump's America, which appeared to be turning its back on NATO and the security of Europe.

President Macron's ambition went further than that, though. He also set out a plan for European defence sovereignty. 'France', he announced in an April 2018 speech, 'is willing to enter into a concrete debate among European countries on the nature of mutual solidarity and defence relations.' 'Europe', he continued, 'can no longer leave its security up to the United States alone. Today it is up to us to take on our responsibility and our security and thus guarantee Europe's sovereignty.' A year later, in November 2019, he expressed himself more dramatically, warning that NATO was 'braindead' and that Europe was in danger of 'disappearing'.[22]

At first sight, the purpose of French policy during this period was the traditional one of maintaining France's 'autonomy', a word which appeared nearly fifty times in the first French Strategic Review in October 2017. This was all the more urgent given the threat that Trump's America and Brexited Britain might abandon Europe. 'Our alliances also have changed,' the review warned. 'We can no longer rely everywhere and forever with absolute certainty on our traditional partners.' What Macron envisaged, though, went well beyond this. His project amounted effectively to the creation of a new, Sixth Republic in France which would also be the first *European* Republic. It was a vision which, magnified in the minds of his many admirers in Europe, echoed across the continent.[23]

Macron had his eye on the future, but his world view was profoundly shaped by history—that of France and that of its continent. In his speech on receiving the Charlemagne Prize in May 2018, he criticised the 'myth' of Europe's seventy-year peace. 'Europe', he cautioned, 'is still and always gripped by history and the tragedy of history.' As Macron explained in an interview in the eminent literary journal *Nouvelle Revue Française* around the same time, he welcomed the return of 'tragic history' to the continent as an opportunity to chart a new course. 'Europe', he said, 'will no longer be protected in the way it has been since the Second World War.' 'For this continent of petit bourgeois who believed themselves prosperous and sheltered,' Macron continued, 'a new adventure is beginning in which tragedy will return.' 'This adventure', he predicted, 'will breathe new life into us.'[24]

Where the tragedy would come from was unclear. Macron himself primarily seemed to fear terrorism, especially that of the Islamic State, which he defined as the ‘key issue’ both before and immediately after taking power. This was also the priority set in the French Strategic Review of 2017. Strikingly, Macron made no reference to Russia in 2017–2018 beyond noting the ‘problem of [the annexed territory] of Crimea’ and warning that it would ‘be mistaken to cut ourselves off rather than forging a long-term relationship’ with Moscow.[25]

Indeed, Macron opened a ‘strategic dialogue’ with Putin in 2019, sending his confidant and geopolitical soulmate Jean-Pierre Chevènement, a former defence and interior minister, as a personal emissary to the Kremlin. Part of his motivation may have been to gain some leverage with Moscow with respect to the Eastern Mediterranean, but the main purpose of the exercise was to achieve a global Great Power balance. Macron wanted to avoid pushing Russia into the arms of the PRC, but he also wanted to explore the possibility of a Eurasian integration project that he christened ‘from Lisbon to Vladivostok’. The result was a series of high-level meetings between Macron and Putin, as well as between the defence and foreign ministers of both countries, and the establishment of a number of working groups, which continued until early 2022.[26]

In the Indo-Pacific, France continued to promote a multilateral order conducive to the free passage of goods and the maintenance of the liberal economic order. In 2019, the chief of the French Naval Staff, Admiral Christophe Prazuck, announced that France wanted to ensure the safety of the ‘dots’, by which he meant chokepoints, such as the Straits of Hormuz, Malacca, and Bab el-Mandeb, as well as the safety of the sea-lanes and of the fish stocks, hydrocarbons, and other resources in its exclusive economic zone, which was extensive, thanks to its numerous overseas territories in the Indo-Pacific. France also promised to conduct its own freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea and generally signalled its support for the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific.[27]

This did not make France an accomplice of the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ in the region—far from it. Macron sought to distance his country from any putative Sino-American conflict over Taiwan and to dissociate from US economic decoupling from China. He tried to engage India separately,

issuing a joint declaration on the region with Prime Minister Modi in March 2018. Macron sought to repeat the exercise with Australia in May 2018 when he issued a ‘Vision Statement on the Australia-France Relationship’. A year later, the French and Indian navies held their biggest ever joint exercises in the Indian Ocean. Despite ‘Global Britain’s’ increasing engagement in the Indo-Pacific, France considered itself the premier European power in the region. Paris also sought to ‘Europeanise’ its presence by encouraging the European Union to develop its own strategy for the region. In April 2023, referring to Sino-American tensions over Taiwan, Macron warned of a ‘trap for Europe’ if it got ‘caught up in crises that are not ours’, rendering the continent a ‘vassal’ instead of a ‘third pole’ in the world. This approach enjoyed some success. When Chinese leader Xi Jinping visited Europe in May 2024, he visited only three countries: Hungary, Serbia—and France.[28]

Macron also maintained an active policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Africa. He tussled with the Turks over Libya, where he backed the same candidate for the presidency as Russia (General Khalifa Haftar), and over Cyprus. Macron initially persisted with Operation Barkhane in the Sahel, though he did try to multi-lateralise the venture as much as possible through a policy of ‘Africanisation’ and ‘Europeanisation’. Increasingly, the mission in Africa was justified in terms of defending ‘Europe’s southern border’.[29]

Throughout this period, the United Kingdom remained a significant reference point for France. On the one hand, Macron never tired of stressing that the Brexit vote was an ‘alarm bell’ for Europe and that the United Kingdom’s subsequent travails showed that Brexit had ‘failed’. Macron also tried to resist the linguistic marginalisation of France. Shortly after his election in 2017, he stated that ‘English is not destined to be the only foreign language that Europeans speak’. Macron also tried hard to persuade financial services workers to relocate from London to Paris. The French elites, remarked Robin Rivaton, CEO of the leading European real estate data quality management platform, Stonal, ‘have a desire for revenge on London. We have only known London triumphant which has crushed Paris.’ When relations were particularly bad during the Brexit negotiations in May

2021, the French even threatened to cut off the electricity supply to the Channel Islands.[30]

On the other hand, France often treated Britain as the only other democratic European Great Power. In October 2017, France's Strategic Review looked forward 'despite Brexit' to working with the United Kingdom on defence, as it was 'the only European country that still has global ambitions, a nuclear deterrent, and the ability to conduct high-intensity operations'. The French European Intervention Initiative of 2017, intended to function outside the EU framework, was obviously geared towards cooperation with the United Kingdom. Likewise, the 'E3' format—that is, of informal security cooperation between the United Kingdom, France, and Germany—also recognised the importance of London. When Macron cast his country as a power with global reach in November 2019, he added that 'basically, only the UK, via the Commonwealth, can claim a similar reach, although it has decided to follow a different path [after Brexit]'. 'But our traditions and our diplomatic history are different,' Macron continued. 'We are less aligned with American diplomacy which in this world gives us more room for manoeuvre.' 'When I say balancing power,' he added, 'that also raises the question of our allies. But to put it very simply, we have the right not to be outright enemies with our friends' enemies.'[31]

At first all went well. At home, Macron brought down unemployment somewhat and reduced the budget deficit to below the EU limit of 3 percent per annum. He introduced labour and pension reforms, as well as tax cuts for entrepreneurs and investors, and launched an ambitious programme for privatisations of state holdings in national infrastructure, such as airports, the national lottery, and energy. Macron also imposed fuel levies designed to promote sustainability, undertook to support 'tax justice' within France and globally, and began to take on the multinationals. Here again, he was clear about the connection between the national and the European levels. 'France cannot win against Google and Facebook,' the president warned, 'but Europe can at least regulate them.'[32]

Abroad, where he was widely hailed as a saviour, Macron bestrode the world scene like a colossus. The French president managed to keep 'Brexit Britain' in the doghouse, and together with Germany, France 'owned' the

Minsk and Normandy peace process between Russia and Ukraine. In 2019, Germany and France concluded the Aachen Treaty, by which both sides committed to deepening their foreign, security, and European policy cooperation. Next to Angela Merkel, Macron was in many ways the leading European figure in the last years of the decade. In the summer of 2020, at the height of the COVID pandemic, he even got the Germans to agree to something that resembled the fabled ‘eurobonds’—that is, US- or UK-style treasury bonds issued by the European Union as a whole rather than by the individual member states. But by then the tide was already going out on Emmanuel Macron.[33]

The domestic situation turned against him after an eighteen-month honeymoon. In November 2018, his reforms, especially the fuel taxes, provoked the ‘yellow-vest’ protest movement. This was primarily rural in nature but also engulfed many cities. Soon the urban areas were hit by strikes and race riots. Terrorist attacks, many of them overtly antisemitic, continued. Gang violence escalated. In the hot summer of 2023, Marseille erupted temporarily, turning large parts of the country’s second city into a no-go zone for the authorities.[34]

Meanwhile, Macron’s European plan hit a wall. His economic proposals were violently criticised in Germany for giving away more German money to support profligate peripheral countries without a clear democratic mandate. Important fiscal conservatives within the European Union, such as Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, also opposed the president’s plans, not least because of the ‘moral hazard’ they saw in providing member states with financing they could not repay. Most important of all, Macron long struggled to get any sort of response to his European reform proposals from Angela Merkel’s coalition government. It took six months for her to respond that no great leap forward in fiscal integration was to be expected from her. ‘Solidarity must never lead to a debt Union,’ she warned, ‘but must come in the form of help towards self-help.’ Worse, if Merkel was at least willing to entertain the idea of a Eurozone budget, her Social Democratic finance minister, Olaf Scholz, refused to accept French demands for a ‘eurozone budget with its own resources, for [economic] stabilisation and convergence’.[35]

Despite Macron's attempts at economic reform, the French public debt grew from 98 percent of GDP in 2019 to around 120 percent in 2022, largely as a result of the COVID pandemic. France was also the second most highly taxed country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) after Denmark. On both counts, Germany performed significantly better.

In the end, the election of Emmanuel Macron proved a false dawn both for France and for Europe. It was a good example of how personality alone is not enough to sustain Great Power status. Macron was undoubtedly an unusually dynamic and capable figure, but even he was unable to transcend the limitations of France. Macron could not change France without changing Europe, but in order to change Europe he needed to change France. In addition to the time he spent battling Brexit and chasing ghosts in the Kremlin, he exhausted his energies trying to persuade the Germans to back his European reform programme. By the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it was clear that Macron had run out of road in Europe.

France's Great Power position now came under increasing challenge. In June 2020, a French frigate was turned away by Turkish escort vessels when it attempted to search a Turkish freighter suspected of carrying arms illegally to Libya. In Africa, things went from bad to worse. France suffered fifty-five fatalities in Mali with little to show for it; the Islamic State was well-ensconced in its self-proclaimed 'Sahel Province'. In February 2022, Macron cut his losses and began to withdraw all forces from Mali, where a pro-Russian government seized power in a coup. Thanks to further Moscow-sponsored coups in Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger, Russian influence was now rampant across the region. It was powerful even in democracies such as Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, where, in late 2024, President Alassane Ouattara announced that French troops would be leaving in January 2025.

To the east, in the South Pacific, the relentless advance of the PRC among the smaller island nations threatened France's position in Polynesia. To make matters worse, in 2024 New Caledonia was roiled by pro-independence riots, most likely stoked but not necessarily instigated by China and Russia, forcing Macron to visit the region.

The two real low points, though, were the announcement of AUKUS, an agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to construct nuclear submarines, in September 2021, and then the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. AUKUS meant the termination of the deal Australia had concluded with France only five years earlier and provoked something like a collective nervous breakdown in Paris, which blamed the initiative on 'Anglo-Saxon' perfidy. Less than six months later, France was embarrassed again when it dismissed Anglo-American warnings of the imminent Russian attack on Ukraine, and Macron persisted in a futile 'dialogue' with Putin for several weeks afterwards.[36]

President Macron's subsequent rhetorical flights in support of Ukraine, which contrasted with his meagre economic and military assistance to that embattled country, further undermined France's standing. To be sure, there were a few hundred French troops serving on rotation under NATO in Estonia and Lithuania, French jets participated in the Baltic air policing scheme, a combined arms force was dispatched to Romania, and the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle* was sent to the Eastern Mediterranean. But France's contribution paled by comparison with Britain's and increasingly that of Germany. Moreover, throughout 2023–2024, Macron attempted to divide Russia and China without success. He also damaged his standing among many northern and European states, and within the EU institutions, by warning after the full-scale invasion that one should not 'humiliate Russia'. French policy papers suggested that Russia should not be allowed to collapse on account of its failure in Ukraine, because the PRC would simply inherit the vacuum.

Meanwhile, domestic confidence in France and French power ebbed. In a March 2021 poll, 75 percent of respondents said they believed the country was 'in decline', and 69 percent said they believed it had lost its sovereignty. As Pascal Lorot, the head of the Institut Choiseul, an independent research center focusing on the economy, noted, it was hard to envisage France ever leaving the European Union as Britain had done. This was because the British were 'resilient and cohesive when needed, conscious of the role their country can and should play in the world'. In the end, it appeared that the EU restrained more than it empowered France.[37]

Relations with Germany, the country with which Macron had hoped to reinvigorate the European project, steadily deteriorated. Tensions were building over energy policy, defence expenditure, and the EU's economic governance. Paris was even more irritated when Angela Merkel's successor, Chancellor Olaf Scholz, suggested, in September 2022, that the French seat at the United Nations Security Council be turned into a European one. At the same time, Berlin rebuffed any idea of a Franco-German condominium in Europe, preferring to seek its security through the United States, NATO, and the transatlantic alliance. By October 2022, relations were so bad that Jacques Attali, the former president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, echoing a warning of twenty years before by Philippe Delmas, vice president of the Franco-German conglomerate Airbus, wrote—again hyperbolically—that war between the two countries was no longer inconceivable.[38]

If the French Great Power project was in deep difficulty—intellectually even more than materially—in early 2025 it received a powerful shot in the arm at the start of the second Trump presidency. The new US administration's apparent disregard for alliances, and its determination to strong-arm Ukraine into a bad peace, seemed to vindicate France's long-running claims about American unreliability. Germany began to speak of the need to shelter under the French nuclear umbrella, which was the only one in democratic Europe completely independent of Washington. Macron's status—and France's—unexpectedly rose.

France's ability to play the Great Power role it sought was significant. Institutionally, the country loomed large in global governance. It was one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, with the coveted right to veto resolutions. France was also the leading state, along with Germany, in the European Union. Moreover, in the new geopolitics of the early 2020s, the country's nuclear weapons capability mattered more than it had since the Cold War. With its nearly three hundred warheads, France boasted the fourth largest nuclear arsenal in the world, behind only Russia, the United States, and China, but ahead of the United Kingdom. More importantly, unlike that of the British, the French arsenal was entirely independent from development to delivery. Unlike Britain,

which could launch only from submarines, France could deliver its deterrent from air and sea (the land-based missiles were scrapped in the 1990s).

It was a different story, though, with respect to conventional military capabilities. To be sure, French forces were well trained and respected, and the largest in Europe outside of Russia and Ukraine. They conducted more than a hundred operations between 1995 and 2025. The country, which was the third largest arms exporter in the world, could claim some of the top global defence companies, including Airbus, Thales, Safran, MBDA, and Nexter. Its cyber defences and intelligence services were formidable, though the latter failed to foresee either AUKUS or the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

But decades of underinvestment had left their mark. In 2024, France was only the eighth highest military spender in the world, behind the United States, China, Russia, Germany, Britain, India, and Saudi Arabia. It also maintained a level of defence spending in relation to GDP that was well below that of the UK and was for a long time somewhere around the average for NATO members. This practice cast doubt on the country's Great Power capabilities. The result, as one critic argued, was that France possessed a 'bonsai army' which could field capabilities across the spectrum but lacked the mass to be effective in a war against a peer competitor.[39]

The French armed forces are short of anti-mine, anti-aircraft, and effective submarines. Perhaps surprisingly, given its global ambitions, France lacks the air mobility even of the reduced British armed forces, and was dependent on RAF Hercules aircraft during its deployment in Mali. The French armed forces have also struggled to adapt from counterinsurgency operations to high-end conventional warfare. While some of its naval equipment is rusty and poorly maintained, France has also invested in modern frigates, nuclear attack submarines, and its carrier force.[40]

All of this largely reflected the country's economic weakness, because by the early 2020s it had fallen to rank as the seventh largest economy in the world, behind the United States, China, Germany, Japan, India, and the United Kingdom—even lower if the purchasing power parity metric is used. There was little prospect of reversing this downward trend, partly because

of the growth of the emerging economies, but also partly because of the deep structural flaws in the French economy aggravated by the inflation shock caused by the Ukraine war. Of all the problems—labour market rigidity, high taxation, demographic trends, public debt dynamics, and low productivity growth—the last one, productivity growth, is probably the most important. One way or another, France's overall resource capacity is undoubtedly in relative decline.

France did enjoy serious geopolitical reach. It possessed an impressive range of overseas territories. In the Western Hemisphere, there were Saint Pierre and Miquelon off Canada; Saint Martin, Saint Barthélemy, Guadeloupe, and Martinique in the Caribbean; and French Guiana in South America. In the Indian Ocean there were Mayotte, Réunion, and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands. In the Pacific there were New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, and Clipperton Island. Even if these possessions have small populations and economies and often depend on French subsidies, they still provide Paris with a presence in almost every part of the world.

In addition, the French armed forces enjoyed sufficient expeditionary capacity to deploy around the world in significant numbers, at least in the absence of peer competition: In the mid-2020s, there were about thirty thousand men and women stationed abroad. France's special forces were well capable of carrying out smaller, more sensitive missions. The French naval command for the Indian Ocean operated out of Abu Dhabi in the Gulf. France also operates an important base at Djibouti overlooking the chokepoint of the Bab el-Mandeb. The French navy further maintains an important presence in the Indo-Pacific through a network of attachés and a programme of port calls.[41]

Elsewhere, though, French reach was contracting. For about sixty years, France had enjoyed a well-defined sphere of influence in Africa based on Francophonie, currency control through the CFA franc pegged to the French Treasury, and frequent troop deployments. By the 2020s, France's sphere of influence in Africa was under sustained attack, with withdrawals from Mali, Chad, and Niger. French troops were now present only in Gabon and Djibouti. A former French colony, Rwanda, had joined the Commonwealth. Mostly, France's place on the continent was taken not by the dreaded

‘Anglo-Saxons’, but by the Russians and Chinese, though neither have so far been able to replicate France’s historical role, military presence, and currency control.

France sees its role in the world not only in vindicating French interests but also as representing a distinct global principle. Negatively, this could be as simple as just not being like the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, the Russians, or the Chinese. More positively, France saw itself as embodying the universal principles of the French Revolution. Before his election, Macron spoke of France as a ‘liberating nation’ with a ‘special conception of freedom’, whose duty was to ‘serve as an example’ to the world. ‘We are the heirs to a great history’, Macron asserted in his acceptance speech in May 2017, ‘and to the great humanist message sent to the world.’ Far from being submerged by the European Union or NATO, he averred, France ‘must continue to brandish [its] special conception of freedom, humanity, justice and honour all over the globe’. Macron also tried to come to terms with France’s colonial past, commissioning reports on the Algerian War, the Rwandan genocide, and the possible return of African artifacts. This ideological positioning within but also apart from the ‘West’ mattered, because it provided intellectual flanking fire in support of Macron’s attempts at rapprochement with Russia and China.[42]

In recent times, France’s Great Power reputation has oscillated wildly. By the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the country’s standing in the world had been slipping for twenty years. Then the election of Macron electrified not merely France itself but much of Europe and even other parts of the world. The president of the European Council from 2014 to 2019, Donald Tusk, hailed the French for ‘choosing Liberty, Equality and Fraternity over the tyranny of fake news’. Many looked to Macron to lead the continent, and some even hoped he would mobilise it against Russia. The young president led a surge in French soft power, which peaked (at second place globally, by one estimate) towards the end of the decade, helped by the Brexit vote and the first Trump administration.[43]

There was also the question of the balance between soft and hard power, given the increased importance of the latter in an era of Great Power competition. ‘There is no more “soft power” today,’ the French minister for Europe and foreign affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, remarked in August 2019.

‘We are everywhere if you allow me the expression “in the hard”’. By the start of the 2020s, though, French soft power had visibly declined, dropping (according to one ranking) to sixth in the world, behind the United States, Britain, Germany, China, and Japan. Still, the success of the Paris Olympics of 2024, which followed repeated failures to secure the Games over the past two decades, showed the country’s capacity to cut a dashing figure on the world stage.

France’s principal weakness as a Great Power is its propensity for domestic political turbulence. On several occasions, the state either collapsed or was close to doing so: during the Revolutions of 1789, 1830, and 1848, and the Paris Commune of 1870–1871; during the army mutinies of 1917 and 1940; and again during the *événements* of 1968, the student protests which forced President de Gaulle to flee to the safety of French forces in Germany. Over the past 230 years or so, the country has seen a monarchy, two empires, five republics, and fourteen constitutions. The contrast with the United Kingdom and the United States is striking. Today, the divides in France’s electorate around immigration and the economy are greater than ever, and a far-right victory at the next presidential election in 2027 cannot be ruled out. Having said that, France’s ability to bounce back from adversity, having been repeatedly ‘counted out’, is a testament to its resilience.[44]

It is not clear whether France is a Great Power today or whether it will ever be one again. A lot will depend on whether the country can wrest back the initiative in Europe while maintaining its sovereignty. Like Germany, but unlike all its other potential Great Power competitors, France has lost two of the key attributes of statehood. Owing to membership in the European Union, it controls neither its own border nor its currency, and it is unlikely ever to regain the latter. Macron’s concept of ‘European sovereignty’ may therefore mean the end of France’s sovereignty. Less important, but not trivial, is the question of whether the French can compensate for the loss of their sphere of influence in Africa. Another question is whether the politics of the second Trump administration will provide the intellectual and strategic opening to promote France as a global ‘alternative’. If the answer

to these two questions is in the negative, then the great fear of *déclassement* which has haunted France for so long will finally become reality.[45]

Seven

The Self-Denial of Germany

GERMANY COULD HAVE been a contender. During the three decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall there were some who feared, others who desired, and many who expected that the Federal Republic would become a Great Power. It had the resources and the opportunity to do so. By the second quarter of the twenty-first century, however, the moment had passed. Germany's claim to Great Power status had begun to unravel economically, politically, and psychologically. The main reason that the Federal Republic had failed to become a Great Power is not material but cultural and historical, arising out of the horrors of the Nazi past as well as its long experience of being an object rather than a subject of the European and global system. Next to Japan, Germany is the most striking example of history blocking the path to Great Powerness. It simply has not wanted either the status, the power, or the responsibility that comes with the role. Though this may be beginning to change in the face of the mounting threat from Russia and the danger of an American withdrawal from Europe, the country is still far away from acting—credibly—as a Great Power.

Historically, Germany was an object rather than a subject of the Great Power system. For hundreds of years, there was no state by the name of 'Germany', but rather, the 'Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation'. This entity comprised all of the present-day Federal Republic of Germany plus parts of Poland, France, the Low Countries, Austria, Slovenia, and the Czech Republic. Given its location at the heart of the European continent and its wealth and large population, the empire's strategic significance was recognised by all European actors. It was widely believed that whoever controlled Germany would also dominate Europe. 'If one potentate wielded

absolute power in this realm,' one senior Swedish diplomat warned in 1646, 'all the neighbouring realms would have to apprehend being subjugated.'[1]

Yet the empire itself was not a Great Power but a sui generis commonwealth of polities which varied wildly in size and importance. In the predatory world of European Great Power politics, it was condemned to internal unrest and constant outside intervention. This culminated in the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), during which the Reich not only tore itself apart but was a thoroughfare for foreign armies. This traumatic experience remained the main reference point in German history well into the twentieth century, and Germany became a nation rooted in fear of annihilation. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 ended the bloodshed by establishing a power-sharing system within Germany which was guaranteed by two outside powers, France and Sweden. Under this arrangement, most of the German states enjoyed a conditional sovereignty within the empire, which in turn was semi-sovereign within Europe.[2]

If Germany was not itself a Great Power, two Great Powers emerged on its soil. The Habsburg monarchy coalesced partly through conquest, but largely through dynastic happenstance. Prussia, on the other hand, ascended through the maximisation of its internal resources under the Great Elector and his successors, who became kings in Prussia, and the skill of King Frederick II, 'Frederick the Great', who grabbed Silesia from Austria in 1740 and then managed—thanks to British subsidies, his own genius, and some luck—to hold on to it against a formidable coalition made up principally of France, Austria, and Russia. It was this feat that later prompted the historian Leopold von Ranke to define a Great Power somewhat maximally by its ability to survive an attack by all other actors in the system.

For some time, these dynamics tended to facilitate the survival of the Holy Roman Empire because Prussia, the Habsburg monarchy, and France thought its preservation preferable to a partition. Despite this, there was a steady encroachment by France on Germany's western border throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Then, the destructive energies unleashed by the French Revolutionary armies and by Napoleon brought down the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. Prussia first participated in this process, then attempted to remain neutral, and then fell victim to it. It was

only in 1813–1814, after Napoleon's disaster in Russia, that Prussia and Austria were able to act as Great Powers again.[3]

The German Confederation which emerged with the Vienna Settlement in 1815 was designed to keep Austria and Prussia in balance, and France and Russia at a distance. The Confederation's apparent failure to contain French revanchism and Russian despotism fuelled the rise of German nationalism throughout the nineteenth century. Only the creation of a united German state, so the argument ran, could turn the Germans from mere objects of the Great Powers into subjects with an equal standing in the European system. This vision failed during the liberal revolutions of 1848–1849, when demands for a united Germany went down to defeat. Subsequently, the Prussian minister president, Otto von Bismarck, harnessed German national sentiment, which was shared by many liberal constitutionalists, conservative monarchists, and radicals, to secure Prussia within a wider German whole, by increasing its buffers to the west and north through unification of the non-Prussian states with Prussia to form a German state. Prussia then defeated Denmark, Austria, and France in succession, paving the way for the creation of the Second German Empire in 1871.[4]

So long as Bismarck was chancellor of this empire, Germany managed to manoeuvre successfully between the Great Powers. In 1878, he settled the affairs of the Balkans at the Congress of Berlin. A year later he allied with Austria-Hungary, and the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Italy followed. In 1884–1885, the division of Africa was decided at the Conference of Berlin. Throughout this time, Bismarck maintained good relations with Russia, epitomised by the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887. The chancellor was widely regarded not only as the representative of a Great Power but as an 'honest broker' in Europe and the wider world.

Like many other European states, the new Germany wrestled with its internal demons, its vaulting ambitions, and geopolitical anxieties. Unlike most of them, though, Germany was not only an economic and demographic colossus—at least in European terms—but also located at the heart of the European continent. It felt 'encircled' by hostile powers, and soon it actually was surrounded, not least thanks to its own aggressive policies. Under Emperor Wilhelm II, who got rid of Bismarck in 1890,

Germany began to demand its global ‘place in the sun’. It also fell out with Russia after the Reinsurance Treaty was allowed to lapse. The problem was that while the Reich’s industrial and economic weight destabilised the European balance, it lacked the overseas empire, naval dominance, and sheer mass to be a truly global hegemon. Germany, as Henry Kissinger later memorably put it, was ‘too big for Europe, but too small for the world’.[5]

The Second Reich felt shut out by the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world order, which dominated world commerce and the global distribution of resources and territory. Some claimed that the Reich needed to expand in order to maintain its standing in a world of ‘world powers’, to secure markets and foodstuffs, and to stem emigration, or at least prevent it from ‘fertilising’ America and the British Empire. Others argued that Germany could feed itself through engagement in the global economic system. As Chancellor Leo von Caprivi put it in the 1890s, Germany could either export goods or it could export people.

All of this contributed to a unique strategic culture which had its origins in the Prussian experience. Germany compensated for its vulnerable position in the heart of Europe—the *Mittellage*—through an emphasis on military preparedness, which many condemned as militarism, and a tendency towards preemptive action. Repeatedly, Prussia struck first: in 1740 against Austria, in 1806 against Napoleon (admittedly in the face of massive provocation), and in 1870 against France.

The Reich was by no means solely to blame for the outbreak of the First World War, but its paranoia and policies contributed heavily to a constellation which pitted it against Britain, France, and Russia, and later the United States. Germany’s quest for colonial expansion and naval power was primarily designed to force Britain to take it seriously, but that quest merely succeeded in setting London’s teeth on edge. The Schlieffen Plan, by which the Reich hoped to deal with France and Russia consecutively in a future war, was always a military gamble that also limited Germany’s diplomatic options. The issuing of a ‘blank cheque’ to Austria in 1914 in the latter’s showdown with Serbia meant that Germany was dragged into what started out as a Balkan War.[6]

The Reich secured some astonishing victories early on in the First World War, nearly knocking France out of the war at the start, defeating Russia,

overrunning Romania, and even eventually forcing Russia out of the contest altogether. But hemmed in at the heart of Europe, Germany was cut off from world markets, raw materials, and foodstuffs by the Royal Navy, Russia, and eventually the United States. The country suffered serious food shortages and was eventually ground down. After the American entry into the war in 1917, and the collapse of the Imperial Army in 1918, Germany was forced to accept the punitive Treaty of Versailles. This treaty was designed, among other things, to contain the Reich through a regime of territorial losses, reparations, partial occupation, and disarmament.

During the subsequent period of the Weimar Republic, Germany's first full-scale experiment with democracy (apart from the short-lived 1848 revolutions), the country sought to escape the shackles of Versailles and reassert its position on the global stage. Some, such as Chancellor Gustav Stresemann, sought to work through the structures of the League of Nations, and agreed to accept at least the new western borders in the Pact of Locarno in 1925. Others, such as the architects of the Treaty of Rapallo between Germany and the Soviet Union in 1922, sought to manoeuvre between east and west. Neither approach brought Germany much joy, as it was humiliated by the Great Powers and made to feel very much an object rather than a subject of the international system—or at least that is how many Germans came to feel.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler came to power on the back of a programme to make Germany a world power. On his reading, Germany could only escape what he regarded as the 'enslavement' of the Anglo-American and Jewish world order, and its Bolshevik cat's-paws, by imitating the 'Anglo-Saxon' seizure of space. *Lebensraum*—'Living Space'—in the Soviet Union would give Germany the room to settle its surplus population while accessing the resources needed to develop economically. Hitler thought this strategy, which involved the destruction or enslavement of non-German populations, especially Jews and Slavs, would enable the Reich to expand into a large 'world power' to match that of the United States and the British Empire without getting entangled with the 'Anglo-Saxons' globally. Indeed, Hitler believed that the future of the German people depended on becoming a world power: Germany would be either a world power or 'nothing', he famously said.[7]

This vision failed, at enormous cost to Germany, Europe, and the world. Despite early successes, the Reich was crushed by a coalition of the British Empire, the United States, the Soviet Union, and various lesser allies. During the war, the Nazis perpetrated terrible atrocities throughout much of Europe, especially the mass murder of the Jews, whom Hitler believed to be the agents of Anglo-American capitalism and Soviet Bolshevism and corrupters of German racial purity. Germany was militarily beaten, territorially reduced, occupied, and partitioned; millions of Germans were expelled from the eastern territories. At war's end in 1945—'Zero Hour'—it seemed that Germany, clearly no longer a world power, would indeed be 'nothing'. To trauma and humiliation, already familiar emotions for many Germans, was added shame for the crimes committed by them and in their names.

In short, the problem—historically—has been that there seemed to be no way of making Germany a subject in Europe without turning all the other mainland actors into objects. In the post–World War II era, something new would have to be tried, not least in view of the growing Soviet challenge, and the two great postwar European integration projects were the result. NATO was founded in 1949 in order, as its first secretary-general, Sir Pug Ismay, supposedly said, 'to keep the Americans in, the Russians out and the Germans down'. Two years later, in 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) put the German, French, Italian, Dutch, Belgian, and Luxembourgian coal and steel industries under a supranational 'High Authority'. As the French minister for foreign affairs Robert Schuman once said, 'The solidarity in production thus established will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable but materially impossible.' The subsequent European Economic Community (EEC), the forerunner of today's European Union, was designed to transcend traditional Great Power rivalries on the continent (particularly the Franco-German rivalry), to embed the new Federal Republic of Germany —'West Germany', with its capital in the Rhineland town of Bonn—in a wider European structure, and to mobilise the whole against the Soviet threat.[8]

For West Germany, the European project was both a route back into civilised international society and a vehicle to ensure a secure, stable

environment for economic growth. The Germans eventually escaped the occupation regime and returned to the state of ‘semi-sovereignty’ they had enjoyed prior to the establishment of the Second Reich in 1871. Unlike the French, who seized on the European project to buttress their Great Power pretensions, the Germans embraced ‘Europe’ to replace these pretensions, or, as some alleged, to disguise them. This tendency persists to the present day.[9]

The embrace of ‘Europe’ was embedded in a wider ‘turn’ to and ‘bonding’ with the West (*Westbindung*) in the 1950s and 1960s. This was a cultural and political choice as well as a strategic one. Unlike the Social Democratic leader Kurt Schumacher, who would have been prepared to countenance a neutral but united and democratic Germany, the Christian Democrat chancellor Konrad Adenauer was determined to stick to the Western allies, even at the price of perpetuating the partition of Germany.

During the Cold War, the Federal Republic of Germany was not generally considered to be a Great Power; the ‘other’ Germany, the communist German Democratic Republic (GDR), or East Germany, was largely a Soviet satellite. To be sure, West Germany experienced a remarkable growth spurt during the postwar ‘Economic Miracle’. The Deutschmark became Western Europe’s leading currency, feared by many and respected by all. Germany also used its influence in the EEC to ensure that its manufacturing industry was protected by a high external tariff. The same year that West Germany joined NATO, 1955, saw the establishment of the Bundeswehr, or armed forces, comprising its army, navy, air force, and supporting civil administration. Starting from modest beginnings as the ‘Amt Blank’, or Blank Office—named after Theodor Blank, the man who later became the country’s first defence minister—by the end of the 1980s it grew to become the largest Western ground army on the continent. That said, the Federal Republic not only did not seek nuclear weapons but was forbidden to do so by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which opened for signatures in 1968 and entered into force in 1970. It also did not possess any significant military ‘lift’ capacity beyond its own borders, limiting itself to ‘humanitarian’ missions while its constitution outlawed any unilateral deployment of its armed forces.[10]

If West Germany abjured any Great Power ambitions, it did carry on some of the older German political and strategic traditions. Politically and culturally, the Bonn Republic, with its federal system of *Länder* (states), was the heir to the old Holy Roman Empire. Strategically, it had inherited the old German preoccupation with its central location—*Mittellage*—which put the country in the front line of any future confrontation, conventional or nuclear, with the Soviet Union.

It was partly this fear of escalation and partly the desire to overcome the division of Germany—initially through family visits and prisoner exchanges—that drove the *Ostpolitik*, or Eastern Policy, of Chancellor Willy Brandt after his election in 1969. His administration pursued a policy of rapprochement with the eastern bloc that was often heavily criticised by the CDU-CSU opposition (the alliance of the Christian Democratic Union of Germany, or CDU, and the Christian Social Union in Bavaria, or CSU). According to the doctrine of 'change through trade' (*Wandel durch Handel*), the mutual dependencies created by East-West trade would reduce tensions and ultimately, if not end the Cold War and the partition of Germany, then at least make them more bearable. The construction of a pipeline bringing Soviet gas to West Germany and other European countries, which was furiously opposed by the Americans and foreshadowed later disputes over Russian energy, was part of this approach. In 1975 Bonn was one of the signatories of the Helsinki Accords.

Throughout the 1980s, West German foreign policy was pulled in two directions. On the one hand, there was the imperative to contain the Soviet Union. This found expression in the deployment of US cruise and Pershing missiles as part of NATO's 1979 'Twin Track' decision pairing deployments on German soil with arms control negotiations to counter the threat of the Soviet SS-20 intermediate-range rockets. On the other hand, German politics and society were changing with the emergence of the environmental movement and the Green Party. Both were bitterly opposed not only to atomic weapons but also to nuclear energy. Meanwhile, German society was changing complexion as the economic miracle sucked in labour from Turkey and across Southern Europe. Germany was now exporting goods and importing people.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, the reunification of Germany under Christian Democrat chancellor Helmut Kohl a year later,

and the disintegration of the Soviet Union a year after that fundamentally changed the European balance of power. To some, it was an indication that the European Community had not been able to contain the Federal Republic. As Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher remarked in October 1990, ‘If Germany had really pooled its sovereignty with the rest of the community’, then ‘it would never have achieved unification’.[11]

With the absorption of the German Democratic Republic, the Federal Republic gained a large increase of territory and population as well as long-term economic potential. Moscow, by contrast, was a much-reduced factor. The effect of these shifts, the eminent political scientist William Wallace predicted at the time, would be to restore Germany as ‘the natural hegemon of any European political system’. Some extreme voices, such as the Irish politician and writer Conor Cruise O’Brien, even expected the revival of Nazism and predicted a statue of Hitler in every German town within ten years.[12]

In fact, no such thing happened. Germany was preoccupied for a decade with the costs of absorbing the GDR, whose economic integration proved far more difficult than expected. Moreover, the Federal Republic not only remained embedded in the wider European structures created to contain it, but actively welcomed the widening and deepening of these structures through the enlargement of the European Union. Germany committed itself to the creation of the common currency, the euro, which eventually replaced the mighty Deutschmark as legal tender in the early twenty-first century.

If Germany did not become more assertive, it did eventually become more active. In 1990–1991, amidst much derision, the Federal Republic declined to join the US-led coalition which expelled Saddam Hussein from Kuwait. A year later, when the Bosnian War broke out, Germany was also hesitant, especially after its early recognition of the breakaway republics of Slovenia and Croatia was heavily criticised. Chancellor Kohl laid down that German troops should not serve anywhere they had acted as occupiers during World War II, which was almost everywhere in Europe, but this position proved untenable as the extent of Serbian aggression and ethnic cleansing became clear.

From the mid-1990s onwards, therefore, Germany became more and more involved in the NATO operation to protect first the Bosnian Muslims

and then the Kosovar Albanians. In 1994, the powerful Federal Constitutional Court allowed that the Bundeswehr could be deployed ‘out of area’—beyond NATO territory—but only in the context of UN or NATO missions. Five years later, in 1999, this culminated in full-scale participation in the Kosovo War. Joschka Fischer, the foreign minister of the new Green–Social Democratic government which succeeded that of Kohl, declared that the German experience gave it a particular responsibility to combat genocide. The Germans eventually intervened in the former Yugoslavia not in spite, but because of history. The new chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, by contrast, framed these actions as an indication that Germany was becoming a more ‘normal’ country. On assuming office in 1998, he claimed that ‘Germany standing up for its national interests will be just as natural as France or Britain standing up for theirs’.[13]

Two years later, the Federal Republic became a global military actor once again. In response to the September 2001 attacks, Germany declared ‘unconditional solidarity’ with the United States. It pointedly declined to join the invasion of Iraq—Foreign Minister Fischer famously declared himself ‘not convinced’ by the American case against Saddam Hussein—but it did participate in the campaign in Afghanistan for about twenty years, suffering casualties, including nearly sixty fatalities. In what was a considerable widening of the country’s strategic horizons, Federal Defence Minister Peter Struck proclaimed that Germany was being defended ‘at the Hindukush’, the mountain range which runs close to the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.[14]

The real geopolitical shift for Germany, though, was the end of the old *Mittellage*. For the first time in its history, the country was surrounded only by friends. Hundreds of years of encirclement had ended. It therefore seemed logical to reduce the Bundeswehr, which shed not only a large amount of its manpower but much of its heavy equipment by 2010; Angela Merkel abolished conscription in 2011. As the German historian Andreas Rödder quipped, the thinking was that ‘if we are at peace, why prepare for war?’, thus inverting the Roman writer Flavius’s famous dictum.[15]

Against this background, Germany took a relaxed view of the revival of Russian power when it was announced with fanfare by Vladimir Putin at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, and again later that year when there

was a massive cyberattack against fellow European Union and NATO member Estonia, and then with the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Few of Germany's leaders, and fewer still among its population, regarded Russia as a threat. Those who did were often dismissed as warmongers. Social Democrat chancellor Gerhard Schröder even referred to Putin as a 'flawless democrat'. He was a major supporter, especially after leaving office, of the Baltic Nord Stream Pipeline projects bringing Russian gas directly to Germany, thus bypassing Ukraine and Poland. The growing connection with Russia was justified both as a form of atonement for the crimes committed there during the Second World War and as a continuation of the tradition of *Wandel durch Handel*, change through trade.[16]

German leaders were equally unworried by the rise of China, which was a growing export market fuelling the Federal Republic's own economic surge. This prioritisation of trade with the PRC often shaped, and sometimes softened, broader EU positions on human rights and market access, causing friction with other member states. Angela Merkel initiated the practice of leading an annual trade delegation to China. Germany's status as an 'export world champion', which it had held since 2003, seemed unassailable. All this was as good as it could get for Germany, and it was as good as it did get.[17]

When the global financial crisis broke in 2008, it seemed at first to hit the Anglo-American economies harder. Soon, though, it became obvious that the imbalances built up within the Eurozone were unsustainable. Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain all suffered severe turbulence as their sovereign debt and deficits skyrocketed. Germany, which had steadily been losing interest in European political union since its own unification, now scrambled to shore up the euro. It rejected, though, any suggestion of a common debt, still less of the establishment of a common state, a United States of Europe, to support the common currency. Instead, Berlin prescribed a set of fiscal 'rules' to accompany the bailouts for the individual states, sparking accusations of German hegemony, especially among southern member states grappling with the resulting austerity programmes.[18]

What Germans took from this history as they entered the second decade of the twenty-first century was a set of sometimes contradictory

imperatives. First, thanks to the Third Reich, they had a strong sense of their negative exceptionality. But this record pulled Germany in different directions. If it was usually invoked to justify restraint, it could also be used to legitimate intervention. 'Never again war' could become 'never again genocide', even if stopping it meant going to war. Second, Germany was fundamentally committed to 'the West' and the European project, politically and militarily. Third, at least until the 1990s, Germans had feared that their central location in Europe left them uniquely exposed to Great Power rivalries and at risk of being cut off from world markets. For this reason, despite their commitment to 'the West', German leaders were inclined to try to manoeuvre between East and West. Fourth, and relatedly, the Federal Republic was a strong believer in the efficacy of securing peace, and its own security, through economic interdependence.[19]

The growing economic weight of Germany and its expanded role in Europe around 2010 sparked a discussion as to whether the country had become a Great Power. Some argued that one should 'end the pretence' and hail the Federal Republic as a 'Great Power'; others—echoing a phrase coined by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright with respect to the United States—dubbed Germany 'Europe's indispensable nation'. Even if it was not a conventional military power, others argued, it was a 'geo-economic' one in an age when such heft carried more weight than the hardware of old. Berlin could not wield a military big stick, but it could brandish its trade surpluses, creditworthiness, and regulatory influence in the European Union to force recalcitrant states such as Greece into line.[20]

As Germany's power waxed during the interminable euro crisis, the political scientist and commentator Herfried Münkler dubbed it the 'central power' on the continent, meaning not its geographic location so much as its critical role in 'holding together a heterogeneous Europe being pulled apart by centrifugal forces'. Berlin, not Brussels, he predicted, would decide big issues such as Brexit. Germany had not sought this status; rather, it had fallen into it. The Federal Republic was thus, in the words of the British political scientist Willie Paterson, a 'reluctant hegemon'.[21]

Instead of being a Great Power in the classical sense, it was widely thought that Germany was what one political scientist called a *Friedens*—or

Zivilmacht—a civilian or peace power. This concept performed military restraint, but it also articulated a claim to moral superiority, a different kind of German exceptionalism which elevated the country over the traditional military obsessions of the established Great Powers. Some spoke of Germany's 'cultural hegemony' in Europe because its norms had been so thoroughly internalised by most of the rest of the continent.[22]

German politicians and officials were reluctuant to cast their country as a Great Power, preferring to speak the language not of power but of 'responsibility'. In a landmark statement to the Munich Security Conference in January 2014, as the Ukraine crisis was unfolding, President Joachim Gauck pointed out that Germany benefitted 'more than most from an open world order', and yet he doubted whether it was sufficiently confronting 'the new threats and the changing structure of the international order'. His speech was a plea for Germany to honour its increasing 'responsibility' in the world. The country, he lamented, was seen by some 'as the shirker in the international community'. The president also condemned those who 'use Germany's guilt for its past as a shield for laziness or a desire to disengage from the whole world'. His speech, alongside statements by Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Defence Minister Ursula von der Leyen at the same conference, formed what became known as the 'Munich Consensus' signalling Germany's intent to take on more international responsibility.[23]

In short, while most Germans in the second decade of the twenty-first century believed that their country was important, and becoming much more so with the passage of time, few of them considered the Federal Republic to be a Great Power. Unlike the Cold War generation, which also did not regard Germany as a Great Power but was in no doubt that it lived in an age of Great Powers, and even of superpowers, most Germans of the Merkel era believed that globalisation had created a world in which Great Powers were a thing of the past. The chancellor herself summed up this view when she stated, in March 2014, shortly after the annexation of Crimea by Russia, 'We are witnessing a conflict about spheres of influence and territorial claims, such as those we know from the 19th and 20th centuries but thought we had put behind us.'[24]

Germany was therefore rudely awakened, or should have been, by the return of Great Power politics after about 2010. Throughout the following decade and a half, repeated crises hit Berlin, which was still grappling with the fallout from the 2008 financial meltdown. Germany was confronted by the outbreak of civil war in Libya and Syria, the Russian annexation of Crimea, Brexit, an escalating migrant crisis, the first election of Donald Trump, the emergence of the Sino-American split, the COVID pandemic, full-scale war in Europe, and then the second coming of Donald Trump.

Globally, the Federal Republic had five main preoccupations during this period. First, it was exercised by Europe's shrinking share of the world's economy. Second, it was deeply concerned by the speed of global warming and other threats to the environment. Third, Germany was particularly exposed to the backwash from the Syrian civil war, which had resulted in the arrival of over one million refugees in the Federal Republic in 2015–2016. Fourth, and relatedly, German leaders were worried about the supposed erosion of democracy through the rise of populism, Trump, and Brexit (phenomena which they tended to conflate). Fifth, there was the related threat from international terrorism, which was tragically aggravated by the influx of migrants from the Middle East. For example, in December 2016, an attack on the Berlin Christmas market by a Tunisian national killed twelve people.

Domestic developments interacted ever more with the international. The turn away from oil was partly driven by the desire to escape dependency on Middle Eastern energy but created a new one with respect to Russia. The complete abandonment of nuclear energy after the 2011 Fukushima reactor disaster in Japan, a core demand of the Green Party and the environmentalist movement, only increased this reliance on Russia. Turmoil in the Middle East, driven by both interventions and the absence of interventions, generated refugee flows that fuelled a populist reaction, much of which was sympathetic to Russia.

More broadly, Germany was exercised about what it perceived to be the decline of the rules-based economic order, but it was also wary of the cost of defending it. Though unsettled by Moscow's revanchism, Berlin did not want to jeopardise the supply of Russian gas on which German industry and the *Energiewende*—the transition from fossil fuels to sustainable energy sources—depended. German leaders also worried about the deterioration of

relations between the PRC and the West, especially the United States, which threatened an economic growth model based on exports to and production in China. They were even more exercised, at least initially, by the twin shocks of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in 2016, which many interpreted as an Anglo-American secession from the liberal international order.

Regionally, Germany was primarily focused on its own continent. The Federal Republic's top priority was supporting the European Union, especially the embattled common currency. If the euro failed, Merkel never tired of warning, Europe would fail. After the Brexit referendum, Berlin was also determined to discourage any further departures and to defend the single market. Under pressure, Germany clung more than ever to the vision of Europe as a legal 'peace order' which would see off all challenges. Defence expenditure, which had been falling since the end of the Cold War, continued to drop, and Germany's military capabilities steadily eroded.

In Berlin's eyes, if the challenge in Europe at the start of the decade was political and economic, it became more military with the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, Putin's fomenting of rebellion in Eastern Ukraine, and ultimately the full-scale invasion of the entire country. The return of war and territorial expansionism to the continent caught Germany off-guard—it was completely unprepared, both materially and intellectually. The Bundeswehr was in no position to deter Putin, and German elites had unlearned whatever geopolitics they had known over the previous two decades. Besides, German industry and environmental policy were dependent on Russian gas. An International Monetary Fund study estimated that a complete cutoff of Russian gas would result in a cumulative GDP loss between 2022 and 2024 equal to about 4.8 percent of Germany's 2021 GDP.[25]

Despite the salience of Europe, Germany was becoming increasingly interested in the Indo-Pacific. In its first policy document for the region (dated September 2020), the Federal Republic stressed its commitment to the rules-based international order in the Indo-Pacific, its support of measures to stem climate change, and the importance of supply-chain diversification. With the exception of the latter, which was code for reducing dependence on the PRC, this was an anodyne list. No mention was

made of tensions over Taiwan or in the South China Sea. Still, in February 2020, the German frigate *Bayern* was sent to the region in order to monitor sanctions against North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, which was at least a toe in eastern waters.[26]

Meanwhile, Germany's economic interdependence with the PRC became ever deeper, even as the first Trump administration began to decouple the United States from that country. To be sure, there was anxiety when a Chinese company bid to take over the German electronic robot manufacturer Kuka, and that same year screening of foreign direct investment by potentially problematic states was stepped up. But despite attempts by Economics Minister Sigmar Gabriel to find an alternative buyer for Kuka, the sale went ahead.

At the global level, Germany responded to these challenges by reaffirming its commitment to the rules-based order. The image of Angela Merkel entreating a petulant Trump at the G7 meeting in 2018 over his abandonment of the rules-based international order, as other leaders watched, became iconic. Indeed, during the second half of the 2010s, the chancellor was widely hailed as 'leader of the Free World', a title she never claimed herself. As token of the Federal Republic's support for the United Nations, but also of its increased ambition, Germany renewed its call for a permanent Security Council seat. This, Chancellor Merkel's former foreign policy advisor Christoph Heusgen argued, would turn Germany from a 'global payer' into a 'global player'.[27]

Unfortunately for Berlin, and for the West as a whole, neither the United Nations nor the whole panoply of international governance—from the European Union to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe—proved capable of deterring Russian designs on Ukraine. In 2014–2015, Germany teamed up with France to find a compromise solution, or at least to freeze the conflict, through talks at Minsk and on the sidelines of the seventieth anniversary celebrations of the Allies' World War II Normandy landings. Even though this failed to end the fighting, Berlin refused to contemplate extending the EU sanctions against Russia to the vital energy sector, not least thanks to intense lobbying from German firms and sectors dependent on Russian energy for their production. History, the

Federal Republic's leadership argued, had shown that these connections would not be weaponised by Moscow.

While the German mainstream was firmly 'Atlanticist', there was a significant minority who felt that the country needed to hedge in order to mitigate American hegemony and protect its political, economic, and cultural interests. Few went as far as former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, who wrote in 2021—by his own lights prophetically—of a 'last chance' to establish a 'new world order' in which a continental alliance of Moscow, Berlin, and Paris would offer a radical alternative to Western hegemony. But there were many in the Social Democratic Party, which was part of the governing coalition, who sympathised at least to a degree.[28]

By the early 2020s, therefore, Germany was in no doubt about the return of Great Power politics. Some of its leaders shared the Anglo-American vision of a world divided between Western democracies and Eastern autocracies. Foreign minister Annalena Baerbock saw Germany and its allies as locked in a 'systemic rivalry' with the autocracies. Others, though, were closer to the French concept of an emerging multipolar order. In a speech shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Chancellor Olaf Scholz spoke of a 'new multipolar world'. A year later, in his foreword to the first German National Security Strategy, he predicted that the twenty-first century would be 'multipolar'.[29]

Unlike Paris, which oscillated between articulating a French and a 'European sovereignty', Berlin did not regard itself as a separate pole, but firmly as part of a wider European one. The 2021 coalition treaty between the Social Democrats, Greens, and Free Democrats, for example, contained references to 'European sovereignty', though these were more weighted towards economic and regulatory power than towards the military-strategic autonomy that the French wanted. Germany saw no contradiction in the division of European sovereignty into an economic-legal ordering system based in Brussels (the European Union) and a separate military-strategic one headquartered in the same city (NATO). Still, while Berlin did not frame itself as a separate pole like Paris, it did on occasion assert distinct positions from the EU consensus and NATO policy, especially on trade and energy relations with Russia.

All in all, at this time, Germany—not least thanks to domestic opposition—did not welcome deeper European political integration and was opposed to transferring the defence of the continent from NATO to the European Union. The authority the Federal Republic ‘uploaded’ to Brussels thus did not supercharge a European Great Power, but instead effectively evaporated. Like the old Holy Roman Empire from which it had emerged, Germany ensured both that the EU would lack the cohesion to act as a Great Power, and that the EU would relieve it of the obligation of behaving like one itself. Germany did not cloak its Great Powerness in a European garb, but instead hid in ‘Europe’ from being a Great Power.

In its response to all these challenges, Germany did not act as a Great Power. To be sure, Berlin led on rescuing the euro. The resulting ‘austerity’ measures and fiscal ‘rules’ led to the de facto imposition of German (and Northern European) preferences on the rest of the Eurozone. Volker Kauder, the leader of the parliamentary group of the governing Christian Democratic Party, memorably announced in November 2011 that ‘now suddenly Europe is speaking German’. Chancellor Merkel and President Sarkozy of France—‘Merkozy’—collaborated closely, but the imbalance in the relationship was clear. Greece, in particular, nearly imploded in the face of repeated ‘bailouts’ and austerity measures imposed by the EU. Furious Greeks accused Angela Merkel of behaving like Hitler. Ironically, a currency which had been primarily designed to contain Germany had become the vehicle for increased control by Berlin of the entire Eurozone economic system. In some ways, one could speak of a ‘European Union of the German Nation’.[30]

It is also true that Germany ‘uploaded’ its policy of engaging Russia to the European Union. Along with France, Berlin was also prominent among those blocking NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia in 2008. In 2014, after the annexation of Crimea, Germany blunted the force of EU sanctions against Russia in order to safeguard its energy interests. A year later, the Federal Republic ignored furious objections from Northern and Eastern Europe to authorise construction of a second pipeline from Russia, Nord Stream II. It then compounded these offences, especially in Eastern European eyes, by unilaterally admitting more than a million Middle

Eastern refugees, and then demanding that they be redistributed across the Union.[31]

That said, Germany did not act as a European hegemon. It failed to push through many of its preferences with respect to the euro. Much of Northern Europe was even less inclined than Germany to indulge the bailout states, and the New Hanseatic League, as it was dubbed, blocked Franco-German attempts to establish a serious EU budget. With respect to the refugee crisis, Berlin was unable to compel all fellow member states to accept 'their quotas', though some did so.[32]

In fact, many hoped that Angela Merkel would lead the European Union out of the morass. The chancellor was often accused of lacking vision, and of declaring a lack of 'alternatives', when many believed that radical action, such as political union and the introduction of euro bonds, was needed to put the common currency and the entire European project on a firm footing. The Polish foreign minister, Radosław 'Radek' Sikorski, summed up this widespread frustration when he remarked, in November 2011, 'I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear its inactivity. You have become Europe's indispensable nation.'[33]

Likewise, Germany did not seize the opportunity to 'lead the free world' in the face of Brexit and Donald Trump's first administration. To be sure, in 2017, in the face of the US president's ambivalence about NATO and Britain's looming departure from the European Union, Chancellor Merkel warned that Europe could no longer completely rely on its long-standing British and US allies, but must now be prepared to 'take its fate into its own hands'.[34]

In reality, Germany neither led a European-wide increase in defence expenditure nor raised its own budget enough to deliver on the chancellor's demand. Moreover, the Federal Republic actually deepened its export reliance on the PRC and its energy dependence on Russia. Merkel's Social Democratic successor, Olaf Scholz, did much the same. In fact, not only did Germany not lead Europe, but it consistently sabotaged a more robust European Union policy towards Russia and China. For example, Berlin was a strong supporter of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) between the EU and China, which, although designed to improve market

access for both parties, became highly controversial and was ultimately frozen in 2021.

Just how little Germany was acting as a Great Power in Europe was demonstrated in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This precipitated a deep political, moral, and psychological crisis in the Federal Republic. Decades of 'change through trade' had not stopped the attack, nor did it deter the Russians from cutting off the gas supply later that autumn. The country was militarily completely naked. Immediately after the invasion, the *Generalinspekteur* of the Bundeswehr, Alfons Mais, announced to widespread consternation that the equipment cupboard was 'bare'.[35]

Chancellor Scholz acknowledged the crisis in his famous speech shortly after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, in which he spoke of a *Zeitenwende*, a change in times, and promised a special fund of 100 billion euros to prepare Germany for the military challenge ahead. He later promised that the country would become 'the guarantor of European security that our allies expect us to be'. His party chairman, Lars Klingbeil, went further when he said, in June 2022, that 'Germany must take on the role of a leading power [*Fuehrungsmacht*]'. Germany's defence minister, Boris Pistorius, even spoke of the need for the country to become *kriegstuechtig*—that is, capable of war. Energetic steps were taken to mitigate the loss of Russian gas. Liquid natural gas terminals were built in a record eight months, causing Chancellor Scholz to hail a new *Deutschlandtempo*. It was announced that a German Panzer brigade, about four thousand men, would be permanently deployed to Lithuania. Public opinion shifted decisively in support of stronger measures against Russia and greater military preparedness. Many thought that all this would herald a more assertive German policy across the board.[36]

In practice, though, support for Ukraine itself took a very long time to materialise, and Germany did not play the leading role in the European containment of Russia which many had hoped for. Defence spending inched only slowly upwards, and procurement was leisurely and plagued by bureaucratic and legal hurdles, so that none of the additional funds announced with such fanfare in the *Zeitenwende* speech were actually spent before the end of the year. German industry, which was forbidden by law

from producing heavy weaponry without government permission, was slow to respond. The dispatch of heavy equipment to Ukraine, such as Leopard tanks, was resisted as long as possible, on the grounds that the move might 'provoke' Russia; key weapons systems, such as Taurus missiles, have not been sent at the time of going to press. The deployment to Lithuania was dragged out. One wag spoke of a *Zeitlupenwende*, 'slow-motion change'.[37]

Some critics, such as Sönke Neitzel, the country's only professor of military history, compared the Federal Republic's halting response to that of the Holy Roman Empire, which, as he noted, had been 'washed away', and he warned that the same fate beckoned for Berlin. Carlo Masala, a professor at the Bundeswehr University of Munich, charged that 'German bureaucracy is more afraid of the Federal Audit Office than the army of the Russian Federation'. Rather than leading, the German government wanted to be pushed or embarrassed into action. Riffing on the chancellor's reference to a new tempo, the analyst Benjamin Tallis claimed that the country moved only at the 'speed of shame'.[38]

In absolute material terms, Germany's support for Ukraine was, eventually, substantial. By the end of 2023, it had overtaken the United Kingdom as the biggest single European provider of military aid in absolute terms. This was in addition to extensive economic assistance and, unlike in Britain, the acceptance of a large number of Ukrainian refugees. This support commanded widespread public approval. Germany's was also one of the largest forces deployed in the Baltic states (in Lithuania) as part of the 'enhanced forward presence' strategy.[39]

At the same time, Germany's energy payments had substantially helped Putin to build the army which invaded Ukraine, and in the first six months after February 2022, the Federal Republic—like the European Union as a whole—continued to spend more on Russian gas than it did on aid for Ukraine. It was Russia, not Germany, which eventually stopped the flow of gas; it was only after Putin cut off the gas that the pipeline was blown up, by whom is not entirely clear, but it is unlikely to have been the Russians. Moreover, even Germany's increased efforts in support of Ukraine were in relative terms far smaller than those of weaker economies like Poland, Estonia, and Latvia.[40]

If the economic fallout from the Russian attack on Ukraine was bad enough, there was worse to come. The PRC's renewed emphasis on export-led growth after the collapse of its property bubble in 2021 threatened key German sectors, such as automobiles and chemicals. Having already seen its solar panel and gas turbine industries decimated by Chinese competition, Germany now braced for a second 'China Shock'. After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, most of German business gave up on Russia, which made the country even more dependent on China.[41]

Germany therefore did not follow America and Britain along the path of 'derisking'. On the contrary, over Washington's strong protests, Chancellor Scholz led a trade delegation to Beijing in 2022; he also approved the sale of a substantial proportion of a strategic terminal in Hamburg port to a Chinese company, albeit with a reduced stake which did not cede controlling rights. In early 2023, the chancellor explicitly rejected the idea that 'the dawn of a new cold war' would soon 'pit the United States against China'. Ola Källenius, the CEO of Mercedes-Benz, warned that a complete decoupling from China would be 'unthinkable'. The default geo-economic world of the German elite was summed up by the head of the Federal Intelligence Service, Bruno Kahl. 'Russia is the storm', he remarked in October 2022, and 'China is climate change'.[42]

Germany's discomfort with Great Power politics was reflected in its unwillingness to think strategically, or even to acquire the machinery to enable it to do so. Until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, its major policy documents did not refer to the balance of power at all, and thereafter did so only obliquely. The idea of a National Security Council or even a National Security Strategy was long resisted, partly because the German constitution placed foreign policy firmly under the foreign minister, and partly because the very idea of one seemed inimical to the concept of Germany as a *Zivilmacht*, a 'civilian power'. When Scholz announced a National Security Strategy after the *Zeitenwende*, it took more than a year for that rather bland document to appear. A German National Security Council, as long demanded by Merkel's former foreign policy advisor Christoph Heusgen and others, was finally established in August 2025.[43]

The result of all this is that the Federal Republic is ill-prepared today to deal with the threat of a Russian attack on Europe, especially if Washington

reduces its military support to NATO. The Federal Republic suffers from what the former German ambassador to Moscow Rüdiger von Fritsch described as a ‘strategic deficit’. Experts might differ on whether Germany should confront Vladimir Putin, but they are in complete agreement that it cannot do so because it lacks the military means and strategic culture to do so. General Erich Vad, formerly Chancellor Merkel’s military advisor, stated bluntly that Germany was not a ‘Global Player’—that is, not a Great Power—and could not compare itself with the United States, with China, or in certain respects even with (the economically much weaker) Russia. Despite the country’s undoubted potential, he continued, nobody was looking to Berlin to provide an answer to global challenges, at least not geopolitical ones.[44]

Meanwhile, German domestic politics have become ever more fraught under the impact of economic crisis, migration pressures, and the dislocations of the Ukraine war. Parties sympathetic to Putin, such as the Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), Die Linke (The Left), and the new Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance), surged at the polls in the mid-2020s. They gave expression not merely to some primordial populist resentment, but also to a long-standing strand in German geopolitical thinking, which looked to an accommodation with Moscow rather than a closer relationship with the West.

Despite a growing minority among the Conservatives, Greens, and Liberals who favour a more assertive global role, many of the German elite and most of the general population simply do not want their country to be a Great Power. Both Merkel and Scholz stressed that the Federal Republic only moved in lockstep with its allies. They spoke of responsibility rather than leadership. The vanguard role that the United Kingdom played in the supply of military equipment to Ukraine was anathema to them. This sentiment was even more pronounced among the German public. In a poll taken in September 2023, some eighteen months into the full-scale Russian invasion, nearly three-quarters of respondents rejected the idea that their country might take on a ‘military leadership role’. Germans were much happier, though, with the idea of economic or diplomatic leadership.[45]

In the end, Germany’s failure to act like a Great Power is down to history. If most other major actors draw strength from the past, whether

justifiably or not, the Federal Republic is profoundly constrained by it. Though history is often weaponised against them—for example, by infuriated Greeks during the bailout crises, or by Russian trolls—the Germans also cite their past as a pretext to avoid greater military commitment. Indeed, as Germany leans more deeply and more critically into its past, it affects a sense of superiority over those who supposedly fail to do so, such as the British and the Eastern Europeans. One way or the other, the effect is to disable the Federal Republic in the face of the challenges actually confronting it. It was history which drove Germany's embrace of the European project, and history which keeps the Germans from completing it. It was history which underlay the reluctance to stand up to Russia. As the German historian Karl Schlögel remarked, the Germans might have mastered the past, but they have failed to master the present.

Another reason why Germany hesitates to behave as a Great Power is that it evidently lacks the resources to do so, at least militarily. It is true that the German economy, though losing ground against the rising powers, is always among the top four in the world—behind the United States, China, and Japan—and that it is the largest in Europe, well ahead of (in this order) the United Kingdom, France, and Russia; in 2023, as a result of the difficulties experienced by the Japanese economy and currency fluctuations, rather than German dynamism, Germany actually advanced to third place globally. It has a strong manufacturing base. With a population of eighty-four million, the Federal Republic is also by some margin the most populous democratic country in Europe.

But before 2022, very little of this economic and demographic strength went into the defence budget, which in 2021 was a mere 1.3 percent of GDP. Even after the Ukraine shock, German military spending struggled to reach 2 percent. The Bundeswehr lacks almost every conceivable item of equipment. It does not have a 'heavy lift' capacity comparable to the British or the French. Despite the new influx of funds which eventually followed the *Zeitenwende*, much of the Bundeswehr is simply not yet operational. Above all, Germany not only possesses no atomic weapons of its own, but the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty was originally specifically designed to prevent it from acquiring them.[46]

This means that Germany lacks the military reach to qualify as a Great Power. Despite its large and widely respected foreign service, the Federal Republic also does not have a meaningful national ‘sphere of influence’. Such reach as the country enjoys stems from its economic leverage and its ability to work through the structures of the G7, the G20, the World Trade Organization, and, of course, the European Union. Germans are not only well-represented in the European External Action Service—the EU’s diplomatic corps—but also make up the largest national contingent in the European Parliament. Here it is difficult to establish where exactly the reach of Brussels ends and that of Berlin begins.

Germany enjoys a strong global reputation. Despite its past, or partly because of the way it has dealt with it, German soft power ratings are consistently high. In 2022, for example, it ranked third in the world, behind the United States and the United Kingdom. Thanks to the *Energiewende*, the commitment to move to a carbon- and nuclear-free energy system by 2045, and the turn away from nuclear power after the Fukushima disaster in 2011, the Federal Republic is widely seen as a ‘Green Great Power’, a status which enhances its global standing. By early 2024, the country’s electricity generation was 60 percent renewable.[47]

In Europe, German soft power took a battering during the euro crisis, especially over the harsh medicine administered to Greece. But the country soon bounced back, and in 2015–2016 its humane treatment of Syrian refugees won many hearts. Key German brands, such as the national and Bayern Munich football teams, the Oktoberfest, and Volkswagen—at least until it was tainted by an emissions scandal—gained global recognition. The Federal Republic’s genuine efforts to come to terms with its past, however imperfect, contrasts with the lack of such soul-searching in many other countries.

Lacking military power, Germany has consciously pursued ideational leadership. Semi-state organisations, such as the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), the Goethe Institute, Deutsche Welle, the party-political foundations, and the International Chambers of Commerce, promote the German language, German culture, and German manufacturing skills and emphasise initiatives with global purchase, such as the

Energiewende. The country also boasts an enormous foreign aid budget and for a while promoted the idea of a feminist foreign policy.[48]

For many British ‘remainers’ devastated by Brexit and despairing of what they regarded as the uniquely poor performance of their country during the COVID pandemic, Germany seemed almost like a promised land. This mood was summed up in 2021 by John Kampfner in his famous book *Why the Germans Do It Better*. The Federal Republic thus fulfils the Great Power requirement of representing, or claiming to represent, a unique principle in the world, that of a moral superpower which has overcome and embraced the past and is pioneering a new form of sustainable living.

Recently, Germany has sought to parlay its soft power into more concrete influence in the new Great Power world. In January 2025, the DAAD announced that it would pursue a ‘foreign science realpolitik’ in ‘times of geopolitical change’. Its president, Professor Joybrato Mukherjee, justified this by alluding to ‘shifts in the international order’—a reference to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the rise of China, and the return of Trump.[49]

Finally, Germany lacks the key attribute of resilience. Instead of looking back on an unbroken Great Power tradition, the Federal Republic is a relatively new country born out of the ruins of total defeat. The modern history of Germany is one of catastrophe. Its societal resilience, compared to that of, say, the Nordic countries, is low. The large number of Russian-Germans are vulnerable to Kremlin disinformation, as is the disaffected rump from the old GDR. In short, there is not only little support for any great national power project, but German society is fragmented in ways that make it difficult to act decisively and coherently on the international scene.[50]

By the middle of the 2020s, it was clear that Germany was in crisis. For two decades, the Federal Republic, as the distinguished commentator Constanze Stelzenmüller famously put it, had outsourced its security to the United States, its economy to China, and its energy to Russia. Now, with the return of Trump, the rise of China, and the Russian attack on Ukraine, all three are in question. The reputation of the country’s long-serving chancellor, Angela Merkel, once so high, has plummeted since her retirement. The economy

has stalled, beset by an ageing workforce and creaking infrastructure, and the country's belief in itself has crumbled. People no longer say that 'Germany does it better'. 'Peak Germany' has come and gone.[51]

Germany could have become a Great Power. It could have contended seriously for a seat on the United Nations Security Council. Germany could have led the process of European political unification, or the continent's response to the invasion of Ukraine. Many hoped it would. Instead, Germany's supporters and the Germans themselves were forced to face the fact that they ultimately were—or rather had made themselves—objects of the system rather than its subjects. If the Germans were one of the world's 'orderers' as far as economics were concerned, they were very much among the 'ordered' in geopolitical terms. Germany has the resources and reputation to become a Great Power, and could acquire the resilience, but—largely for historical reasons—it lacks the ambition to do so.

Eight

The Stalling of India

INDIA, THE FRENCH president and erstwhile war leader General Charles de Gaulle is said to have remarked, would always be a 'potential' Great Power. It was a two-edged comment which captured both the country's latent strength and the sense that it would never be fully developed. This idea of India as a nation which is forever 'becoming' great but never actually becomes so persists. In the meantime, India has grown to be the fourth largest economy in the world, projected to become number two by the middle of the century, and the fourth highest military spender, recently surpassing the United Kingdom in both categories. Drawing on its rich past, India also claims to be more than just another major power, and to be a 'teacher' to the world. 'We must work as one society with one purpose in one direction', Prime Minister Narendra Modi stated, 'to regain the rightful place of India in the world order. In the past our country had that place.' Despite these ambitions, huge hurdles facing the country in terms of poverty, infrastructure gaps, and bureaucratic inertia remain. India exemplifies the state which, despite the call of history, and expectations, finds greatness elusive because of developmental shortcomings. As a country which has been repeatedly attacked by a more powerful neighbour, India is also a vivid demonstration of the danger of ignoring the perils of the Great Power world.[1]

There can be no doubt of the past glories of India. In 1700, the country contained 22.6 percent of the world's wealth; by 1952, just five years after it emerged from about 250 years of British colonialism, the figure was just 3.8 percent. To nationalists, India had not merely suffered the trauma of

foreign rule but also experienced sustained ‘de-development’. By some reckonings, Britain’s unbalanced trading arrangements and taxation, especially during the early stages of its rule, had cost the country $45 trillion over time. The achievement of Indian Great Power status is thus often seen as a restoration of a position temporarily lost. As in China today, this thinking is rooted in an acute sense of past ‘humiliation’. In the early days of independent India after 1947, the main desire was to make good the time lost since the arrival of the British, but during recent decades Hindu nationalists have wanted to go much further back and restore India to the ‘purity’ and power it supposedly enjoyed before the (Muslim) Moghul conquest. This historical vision shapes India’s global image-making today and its desire to project itself as a ‘civilisational state’, especially towards the Global South.[2]

In fact, Indians never stopped thinking about their national greatness. The Greater India Movement and the Greater India Society (founded in Calcutta in 1926) promoted the idea of an ancient Indian—basically Hindu—expansionist mission, particularly in South-East Asia. If many of the protagonists were undoubtedly chauvinist, both towards the outside world and towards their Muslim fellow Indians, the founding fathers of Hindu nationalism, V. D. Savarkar and M. S. Golwalkar, were more inward-looking. They attributed the triumph of first the Moghuls and then the British to Hindu weakness, and rejected the ‘aggrandisement of power-drunk [imperialist] nations’ (Golwalkar) in favour of a global co-existence based on Hindu values of mutual respect. The mildest form of this thinking was expressed by the monk and philosopher Swami Vivekananda, who wanted India to be respected not on account of its economic or military power but for its ‘spiritual independence’. It is from this complex tradition that Modi and the Hindu nationalist movement claim intellectual inspiration today.[3]

Moreover, India remained a global actor during the British Raj. The Indian army was central to British security not only on the subcontinent, where it faced north and west against Russia and the Pathan tribes, and north and north-east against China, but throughout the Middle East, the Indian Ocean littoral, and indeed beyond. Millions of Indians served Britain in both world wars. Though not of the same standing as the Dominions of

Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa, India was represented at Versailles in 1919. One of the treaty's signatories, Maharaja Ganga Singh of Bikaner, a member of the Imperial War Cabinet, is clearly visible in Sir William Orpen's famous painting of the Hall of Mirrors. In 1945, Sir A. Ramaswami Mudaliar, a member of the Imperial War Cabinet in the Second World War, and the senior Indian administrator Sir V. T. Krishnamachari signed the United Nations Charter at San Francisco.

When India became independent in 1947, following Mahatma Gandhi's campaign of nonviolent resistance, the country was not only roiled domestically by Hindu-Muslim communal strife, and traumatised by its partition through the creation of a separate Muslim state of Pakistan, but also pitched into a hostile international environment. To the west and east, India was surrounded by Pakistan, which many westerners at first saw as an equal actor, and which was trying to wrest control of Kashmir. To the south was Sri Lanka (the former Ceylon), whose relations with its bigger neighbour were poor. In the north and north-east lay China, which had inherited the Qing territorial claims. Indeed, some of the enduring geopolitical preoccupations of Indian policymakers, especially with regard to threats from the west, north-west, north, and north-east, were remarkably similar to those of their British predecessors.[4]

Despite its role during the two world wars, modern India joined the international system with a handicap. After independence, it was denied a permanent United Nations Security Council seat alongside the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China, even though its claim on the basis of contributions made in World War II was roughly equally to China's, and much stronger than France's. It is a grievance which persists to this day and underpins its current demand for Security Council reform. Seventy-five years later, the Indian foreign minister S. Jaishankar complained that India had not been given 'due recognition' for its sacrifices in World War II. At the time, India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, demanded a UNSC seat for the nation, 'to which', as he put it, 'her geographical position, and contribution towards peaceful progress entitle her'. It is striking that Nehru based his claim not on India's military power, but on its moral standing and role as the representative of what we would today call the 'Global South'. Either way, Nehru was clear that his country,

as he put it, ‘cannot play a secondary role in the world’ and would ‘either count for a great deal or not count at all’.[5]

What Nehru was ambivalent about was whether India was a Great Power in the traditional mode. On the one hand, he sought to maintain the old British buffers on the country’s northern borders. ‘From time immemorial, the Himalayas have provided us with magnificent frontiers,’ he stated in December 1950. ‘We cannot allow that barrier to be penetrated because it is also the principal barrier to India.’ ‘Therefore,’ Nehru continued, ‘much as we appreciate the independence of Nepal, we do not like and shall not brook any foreign interference in Nepal. We recognise Nepal as an independent country and wish her well, but even a child knows that one cannot go to Nepal without passing through India. Therefore, no other country can have as intimate a relationship with Nepal as ours is.’ Likewise, India treated Bhutan as a client state whose foreign policy—according to a treaty of 1949—had to be formulated in consultation with New Delhi.[6]

On the other hand, Nehru sought to keep the superpowers at arm’s length and to lead the ‘non-aligned movement’ of decolonised states in a non-imperialist way. In 1955, he co-convened the Bandung Conference of Asian and African states with the Indonesian president, Sukarno. Nehru drew on the Gandhian legacy of human rights, anti-racism, and anti-imperialism to position India as a kind of ‘anti–Great Power Great Power’. India condemned Anglo-French intervention in Egypt over the Suez Canal in 1956 but did not immediately denounce the Soviet invasion of Hungary that same year, mainly to avoid alienating Moscow, a key diplomatic partner with respect to the Kashmir issue. Whatever the reason, the decision cast doubt on India’s claim to represent the principle of non-alignment in the world.[7]

Nehru cast warnings about the Chinese threat to the winds, an approach which the Indian political class and public opinion shared. In January 1950, India was the first non-communist state to recognise the PRC. Four years after that, Nehru concluded the Panchsheel Agreement with the PRC leader Mao Zedong, in which the two men agreed to pursue ‘peaceful co-existence’. Nehru wanted ‘good neighbourliness’ and proclaimed a policy of ‘Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai’, that is, of ‘brotherhood’ between Indians and

Chinese. He also twice refused an offer—first from the Americans and subsequently from the Soviet Union—to transfer China's seat on the Security Council, then held by tiny Taiwan, to India. Nehru did so because he was convinced that the credibility of the United Nations, in which he believed so passionately, required the involvement of the PRC.[8]

No good deed goes unpunished. Nehru did not react when China occupied Tibet in the autumn of 1950 and subsequently annexed the territory, but he grew uneasy as the PRC pushed closer to India in regions west of Nepal and east of Bhutan. Mao claimed the entire Indian province of Arunachal Pradesh as 'South Tibet'; then the PRC started building a road through the Aksai Chin of Kashmir. Nehru's policy collapsed spectacularly in 1962, when the People's Republic roundly defeated India in a short border war, primarily because of the latter's lack of military readiness and logistical weaknesses in the Himalayas. Two years later, India was shocked to learn that China had tested its first atomic bomb. To his critics, especially Hindu nationalists, Nehru had committed the cardinal sin of Great Power politics, looking at the world as he wanted it to be and not as it actually was.

To make matters worse, in 1968 the nuclear non-proliferation regime institutionalised the superiority of the 'Permanent Five' and grouped India with the rest of the world as a country not entitled to develop atomic weaponry. This exclusion came on top of the denial of a permanent UN Security Council seat, and both were taken as a racial slight, which grated on the national pride. At this point, the economies of India and the PRC were of roughly equal size, but the power-political gulf between them was already quite considerable.

The woman who dominated Indian politics from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s, Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, sought to address these challenges. In 1971, she concluded the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation with the Soviet Union, which effectively gave India a security guarantee against Chinese or American military intervention. Moscow became, and has remained, India's principal arms supplier. A few months later, India intervened decisively in East Pakistan after the Pakistani government attempted to suppress resistance to its rule there with extreme violence. Indira Gandhi partly justified the move on

humanitarian grounds, citing the mass refugee flows into India. The United States ‘tilted’ towards its ally Pakistan by sending an aircraft carrier group into the Bay of Bengal, but was unable to affect the outcome.

Pakistan’s defeat completely changed South-East Asia’s strategic map. It led to the establishment of the new state of Bangladesh, seriously weakening Pakistan, which lost 45 percent of its territory and over half its population. Moreover, Bangladesh was very much in India’s orbit. The whole episode consolidated India’s status as the dominant power on the subcontinent. Then, in 1974, the country tested its first atomic device, ostensibly a ‘peaceful nuclear explosion’, partly to satisfy domestic demands and partly to signal its demand to be admitted to the ‘nuclear club’. This had a calming effect on Pakistan, at least until it could develop a bomb of its own, which took another twenty-five years.[9]

India was now acting like a Great Power, certainly regionally, and to some extent more widely. When denied UN authority to intervene in East Pakistan, New Delhi had proceeded regardless. India also refused to condemn the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. It treated its neighbourhood as a sphere of influence. In 1983, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi proclaimed what became known as the ‘Indira Doctrine’: ‘India will neither intervene in the domestic affairs of any states in the region, unless requested to do so, nor tolerate such intervention by an outside power,’ she announced. ‘If external assistance is needed to meet an internal crisis, states should first look within the region for help.’ It was in this spirit that in the late 1980s India sent an ill-fated peacekeeping force to try to end the civil war in nearby Sri Lanka. Among some of her neighbours, though, India’s behaviour was seen less as that of a benign hegemon and more as a justification for dominance, which was sometimes resented. The parallels with the American ‘Monroe Doctrine’ were widely noted.[10]

All the same, India still understood itself as the protagonist of what was then called the ‘Third World’—for example, through its advocacy of a basically socialist ‘New International Economic Order’. As in Nehru’s time, India thought of itself as a moral power as much as a geopolitical one. It would constitute a separate pole in the world largely by virtue of its cultural strength and its economic self-sufficiency. Indira Gandhi therefore spoke of India being ‘a different kind of power’. In practice, however, India was

primarily a regional power, given its limited ability to project power beyond South-East Asia.

In the early 1990s, New Delhi was forced to rethink its position in the world. The Gulf War of 1991 revealed just how far India—which, like Saddam Hussein's Iraq, relied heavily on Soviet weaponry—was militarily behind the West. The war also sparked a rise in oil prices, which brought on a balance of payments crisis for India. Shortly afterwards, the collapse of the Soviet Union threatened to deprive India of its greatest backer. Worse still, the Chinese economy, which had been about the same size as India's thirty years earlier, was now nearly twice as big. As if that were not bad enough, the PRC was supporting Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme, helping Islamabad to test its first device in 1998. New Delhi now scrambled to cope with US-led Western unipolarity, the rise of China, and the resurgence of an increasingly undeterred Pakistani armed forces.

India therefore repositioned itself yet again. The economy was opened to the world through the liberalisation of capital controls, deregulation, and privatisation, unleashing a period of sustained growth. After decades of protectionism, India participated in globalisation. Pioneers such as Sam Pitroda made the country a major player in the information and communications revolution. Indian computer programmers became a global brand, almost a cliché. Economically, therefore, the country seemed to be converging with the West, along with much of the rest of the world.

In geopolitical and cultural terms, however, India was determined to remain a separate pole in the world. The connection with the Soviet Union's successor state, Russia, was continued; it remained the country's main supplier of weaponry. In 1998, India conducted its first explicitly military atomic test, renewing its demand for formal inclusion in the nuclear club. Shortly beforehand, the defence minister described the PRC as 'potential enemy no. 1'. A year later, India repelled a Pakistani incursion at Kargil in Kashmir. If the main targets of Indian military deterrence were Beijing and Islamabad, New Delhi was also wary of the encroaching liberal international order. It opposed the humanitarian interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo, and it refused to sign the Rome Statute establishing the International Criminal Court, on the grounds that these were not compatible with its national sovereignty.[11]

In the first decade of the new millennium, India's status grew steadily. This was partly because of the country's economic advances and partly because New Delhi was increasingly courted by a Washington keen to leverage 'the world's largest democracy' against its main enemy, Islamist terrorism. In 2005, the administration of President George W. Bush stated its determination to help India to become a 'major world power'. That same year, India persuaded the United States and other powers to accept its unique derogation from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty regime. The prime minister, Manmohan Singh, later remarked that the deal finally released India from the 'Nuclear Apartheid' to which it had been subjected by the Great Powers. It was the status issue more than the power question which was key to Indian thinking. In 2010, President Barack Obama supported India's bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.[12]

By now, New Delhi had managed to get most of the world to stop thinking in terms of 'Indo-Pak', a bracketing which put the two countries on the same footing, and to start regarding India as a major actor in its own right. In 2008, the India–United States nuclear agreement, which ended American sanctions against the Indian nuclear programme, also deepened defence cooperation, paving the way for arms sales, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing. Relations between the two countries, which had been dire for much of the Cold War, improved dramatically. Still, the demands of the 'Global War on Terror' after 2001 ensured that Islamabad, thanks to its location next to Afghanistan and security cooperation with Washington, would continue to retain its salience in Western capitals for many years to come.

During this period, India continued to play its distinctive international role. On the one hand, it asserted its right to a sphere of influence, and even began to define its role more widely. In 2004, the foreign minister defined India's neighbourhood as 'stretch[ing] from the Suez Canal to the South China Sea', adding that it 'includes within it West Asia [by which he meant the Middle East], the Gulf, Central Asia, South East Asia, East Asia, the Asia Pacific and the Indian Ocean Region'. Nor was this just bravado: India was playing an increasingly active part on the East Coast of Africa, for example, where it sought to provide an alternative to both Chinese and Western influence. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh liked to speak of his

country's 'strategic autonomy', a policy which was generally seen as a variation on 'non-alignment'.[13]

On the other hand, India still framed itself as a different kind of global actor. Manmohan Singh and President Pranab Mukherjee spoke of the country as a 'synthesizing power' that blended civilisations. Despite its role in the globalisation of the world economy since the 1990s, India also cast itself as the 'voice of the voiceless', most notably by helping to collapse the 2003 World Trade Organization trade talks at Cancun, on the grounds that these failed to safeguard the right of developing countries to protect their agricultural sectors from competition. Its aid programme was branded as 'co-development' and pointedly avoided any kind of political or legal conditionality. This approach proved popular in Africa and in parts of South-East Asia and the Pacific. Finally, India continued to oppose all Western interventions, especially over Libya in 2011, as unwarranted violations of national sovereignty.[14]

The desire to hedge against the West and especially against American unipolarity was evident in the enthusiasm with which the country adopted the concept of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) in 2005–2006. During the first decade of the new millennium, there was even a brief relaxation of tensions with the PRC. Bilateral trade between the two countries expanded rapidly, and they coordinated their climate change positions in negotiations such as those at Copenhagen in 2009. There was talk of a Sino-Indian synthesis—Chindia—which partly reflected a revival of the old 'Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai' rhetoric, and partly the fear of being marginalised by the much-discussed vision of the Sino-American condominium of 'Chimerica'.

This sentiment did not last long. By the start of the new decade, the exponential rate of Chinese economic growth and the PRC's increasingly aggressive policies were causing alarm in New Delhi. In February 2014, the national security advisor, Shivshankar Menon, set out the emerging consensus. On the one hand, he obviously approved of the idea that the era of America-led 'unipolarity' had ended with the financial crisis of 2008 and the growth of 're-emerging or rising powers' like India and China. On the other hand, he had to acknowledge 'the obvious reality of a rising China' and what this meant for the Indian subcontinent, where 'great power

involvement’ was an old phenomenon. He did not think that India should react by becoming a Great Power itself. Instead, invoking Indira Gandhi’s idea of her country as ‘a different kind of power’, he wanted India to ‘remake the international order, making it more equitable, democratic and conducive to our development’.[15]

At around the same time, the veteran Hindu nationalist Murli Manohar Joshi penned a preface to the general election manifesto of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) setting out a rather different programme for national greatness which was also deeply rooted in the past. ‘India is the most ancient civilization in the world’, Joshi wrote, ‘and has always been looked upon by the world as a land of wealth and wisdom.’ He was reasserting these verities, Joshi claimed, because ‘no nation could chart out its domestic or foreign policies unless it has a clear understanding about itself, its history, its roots, its strengths and failings’.[16]

This was the context in which Narendra Modi, leader of the Hindu nationalist BJP, was elected prime minister in May 2014. His impact on the domestic scene in India was immediate and dramatic. Modi sought to transform society and the economy with his ‘Make in India’, ‘Start-Up India’, and ‘Digital India’ initiatives and policies in health-care and other programmes. According to World Bank figures, he made the country easier to do business in for natives and foreigners alike. In part, these policies were designed to build the material base needed to sustain India’s Great Power aspirations, including attracting foreign direct investment, developing manufacturing capacity, and reducing dependency on imports. All this came, though, with an increasingly repressive attitude towards dissent, a strong element of Hindu nationalism, and a growing cult of personality. Not only does Modi have a cricket stadium (in Ahmedabad) named after him, which is unheard of for a living politician in India, but when Indians were given their COVID vaccines they received a certificate with the prime minister’s photograph on them.[17]

The Modi administration’s rhetoric of national renewal was accompanied by assertions about India’s increased importance in the world. During the 2014 election campaign, the BJP manifesto criticised its rivals for failing to make the country an ‘emerging superpower’. ‘A resurgent

India', they argued, 'must get its rightful place in the comity of nations and international institutions'. A year later, the party passed a resolution calling for India to stop 'punching below its weight' and 'to rise as a strong and respected world power'. In 2015, Dr S. Jaishankar, the foreign minister, spoke of transforming the country from 'just a balancing power' to 'a leading power'.[18]

On this basis, the Indian Ministry of External Affairs that same year demanded an expansion of the United Nations Security Council to 'reflect contemporary realities of the twenty-first century'. 'By any objective criteria', it argued, 'such as population, territorial size, GDP, economic potential, civilizational legacy, cultural diversity, political system and past and ongoing contributions to the activities of the UN—especially to UN peacekeeping operations—India is eminently qualified for permanent membership.' Modi himself reiterated this demand when he stated that the Security Council should 'include the world's largest democracies, major locomotives of the global economy, and voices from all major continents' and emphasised India's 'willingness to assume our global responsibilities'.[19]

What the Modi government did not articulate was a traditional claim to Great Power status based on military strength, or a territorially expansionist vision. Although his administration increased defence spending slightly during his first term, the growth of the Indian economy meant that it actually fell substantially as a proportion of GDP, from just over 2 percent to 1.5 percent. Modi also began to explore ways in which the Indian rupee could be internationalised in order to lessen the country's reliance on the US dollar and other reserve currencies. There were even some voices in the BJP calling for the 'return' of Indian lands in the wider neighbourhood. A map showing Akhand Bharat (Undivided India), which included all or large parts of Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, even found its way into the country's new parliament building, which Modi opened with great fanfare. These references have no operational relevance for Indian policy and are mainly symbolic gestures towards the BJP's Hindutva base.[20]

The core of Modi's case for India's importance, however, as with Gandhi, Nehru, and others before him, rested on what he saw as its moral vitality. He wanted the country to command the world by its example and

‘teaching’, not its military power. In a keynote speech a few months after his first election, Modi drew explicitly on Vivekananda’s idea of ‘Mother India seated as the World Guru’. It was up to the Indians, he said, ‘to realize that dream’.[21]

The Modi administration saw raising India’s profile in the world as the key to consolidating its domestic position. Greater standing would translate into the increased investment that the country desperately needed. In this sense, as Modi remarked in January 2017, India’s internal transformation was of a piece with its foreign policy. ‘Choices at home and our international priorities’, he stated, ‘form part of a seamless continuum.’ Modi also used India’s growing status to bolster his personal image and that of the BJP. The country, he argued, was now more respected in the world, and even if this fact did not of itself put a single rupee in the pockets of ordinary Indians, they would at least be able to bank the symbolic capital.[22]

In 2019, a substantial part of Modi’s campaign for reelection was based on his manifesto claim that ‘today India stands tall at the international level’ and that ‘the world recognises India’s immense potential, which is clearly reflected in a record rise in investment’. He was returned with an increased majority in Parliament. Modi’s attempt to repeat the performance in the 2024 contest was less successful, however. His majority was slashed by an electorate which not only felt that the gains from India’s economic growth had been unfairly distributed, and objected to what they regarded as the entitlement and arrogance of the BJP leadership, but also was reluctant to be appeased by their country’s (supposed) increased standing on the world stage.[23]

If India claimed to act as a global ‘guru’, it still had to deal with the world as it actually was. The external environment in which Modi operated was more challenging than it had been at any point since the early 1960s. Pakistan remained resolutely hostile on account of Kashmir, while the infiltration of Islamist terrorists into that province, and into India more generally, continued to escalate. The main threat, though, came from China, magnified by traumatic memories of the defeat Beijing had inflicted in 1962. The PRC was not only outpacing India economically but challenging its territorial integrity. During the 2014 election campaign, Modi accused

China of a ‘mindset of expansion’ and vowed ‘never [to] allow’ the north-eastern province of Arunachal Pradesh to be annexed by Beijing.[24]

Only a few months after taking power in 2014, though, the prime minister’s resolve was tested by a serious Chinese incursion into Ladakh in far northern Kashmir. Three years later, he was forced to send troops into the Doklam region of Bhutan to stop the Chinese from building a road through the territory of his ally. Another three years after that, in June 2020, the two forces clashed once again in Ladakh, resulting in some loss of Indian territory to China. To domestic critics, Modi might have cast the country as teacher to the world, but it was the PRC which was giving the lessons, and India was failing to learn them.

The sense of embattlement and even encirclement was aggravated by increased Chinese activity to the south, in the Indian Ocean. For a period, the Maldives fell under PRC influence, with Indian troops being ordered to leave. China’s ‘Belt and Road’ infrastructural programme seemed to draw close neighbours, such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and even Bangladesh, more into Beijing’s camp. India’s naval position, in particular, grew worse. New Delhi eyed the Chinese base in Djibouti on the other side of the Indian Ocean with suspicion and fretted about the Chinese navy visiting ports in Sri Lanka and Pakistan (where it was suspected of militarising the harbour at Gwadar). Above all, India lacked any capacity to track PRC submarines in the Bay of Bengal.[25]

Modi’s India struggled to respond. Moral leadership was of little use in this kind of strategic competition. The prime minister’s early attempts to engage China led nowhere, so in 2015 he agreed to a ‘U.S-India Joint Strategic Vision for the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region’ brokered by the Obama administration. That same year Modi joined with Japan to produce a ‘Vision 2025’ document. Both agreements expressed support for a ‘rules-based’ order in the area. The first Indo-American maritime security dialogue followed a year later. This definite tilt towards the West was confirmed by India’s participation in the ‘Quad’, a four-power understanding between India, the United States, Japan, and Australia directed against the PRC. Between 2016 and 2022, US supplies of aircraft and naval vessels to India increased markedly, as did Indo-American

logistical and intelligence cooperation. In 2021, the United States overtook China as India's main trading partner.[26]

The West expected that the Chinese threat would propel India towards the closer relationship it had long sought. 'India is a nation that is invested in a free and open order,' US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Alex Wong announced in 2018. 'It is a democracy. It is a nation that can bookend and anchor the free and open order in the Indo-Pacific region, and it is our policy to ensure that India does play that role, [and] does become over time a more influential player in the region.' But hopes that India might join some kind of Indo-Pacific NATO were not realised, because the idea was not compatible with the country's long-established tradition of strategic autonomy and its unwillingness to enter into binding alliances.[27]

In the early 2020s, relations between the democratic West and the authoritarian Eurasian powers deteriorated dramatically, creating both challenges and opportunities for India. On the one hand, the Russian need to replace equipment losses in the war in Ukraine created anxieties that India might be stinted by Moscow in consequence. There were also fears that Russia might be heavily defeated, thus weakening India's Eurasian 'hedge' against China. The nightmare scenario, from New Delhi's point of view, was the prospect of Moscow cutting its military ties to India, either at China's request or for some other reason.

On the other hand, the Russian invasion of Ukraine gave New Delhi an opening to triangulate. Just as Nehru did not condemn the Soviet Union over its invasion of Hungary in 1956, and Indira Gandhi gave her ally a free pass over Afghanistan in 1979, India abstained in the UN vote condemning the Russian attack and helped Moscow to bypass international sanctions, securing in return substantial discounts on its purchases of Russian oil. As part of his policy of courting India, President Biden offered Modi a second opportunity to speak to Congress, an honour previously afforded only to Winston Churchill; Israeli Prime Ministers Yitzhak Rabin and Benjamin Netanyahu; African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela; and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (albeit by Zoom for his first appearance). The idea that India could be weaned off the Russian alliance—the triumph of hope over experience—persisted in the West.[28]

India’s increased importance was evident at two global summits. The first was the G20 meeting hosted by Modi at Delhi in September 2023, when his country was the object of concerted advances both by the Russians, trying to reduce their isolation over Ukraine, and by Western powers trying to draw India into a coalition to balance the Sino-Russian partnership. India appeared to be the ‘swing state’ in the new balance and at the centre of world politics more generally. This was epitomised not least by the country’s involvement in a projected new economic ‘corridor’ linking India with other world regions (the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor, or IMEC). This project was designed as a counterweight to China’s Belt and Road Initiative.[29]

The second global summit was the Munich Security Conference in 2024, at which Foreign Minister Jaishankar was much courted by Western diplomats. To underline the fact that India was not a traditional Great Power, he condemned secret discussions as ‘not conducive to free exchange’. Jaishankar used the occasion to cast India not as a Great Power, or as merely a ‘Middle Power’, but as a ‘New Power’ and ‘a different kind of power’. The problem, the foreign minister lamented, was that the ‘guys at the top are not making space’. Standing above the rivalry between the American-led West and the Sino-Russian axis, he celebrated the fact that the world was ‘returning to its “natural diversity”’ and warned against ‘reduc[ing] complexity’. Still, Jaishankar did strike a traditional note when he said that he thought ‘Great Power competition [was] better than Great Power collaboration’, because the latter could only be at India’s expense.

The result was that India embraced—with reservations—local cooperation with the United States but sought to keep its global distance. New Delhi reminded European capitals anxious about Russia that while Europe had been slow to support India against China over Ladakh, Moscow had done so with alacrity. At the same time, New Delhi wanted to avoid being dragged into the Sino-American rivalry. India’s foreign minister pointedly remarked that Europe needed to rid itself of the mindset that Europe’s problems were the world’s problems, but the world’s problems were not Europe’s problems. As Jaishankar had put it in a book published a few years earlier, in this Hobbesian ‘world of all against all’, India would need to ‘engage America, manage China, cultivate Europe [and] reassure

Russia'. His vision was of an India which would not rely on old-style military dominance, but rather leverage economic growth, diplomatic flexibility, and moral positioning to act as a 'new power'.

Modi's caution was fully justified, because India clearly lacked the resources to confront the PRC challenge head-on and was too reliant on Russia to throw in its lot with the West. The prime minister's failure to invest in the armed forces during his first term left the country dangerously exposed to China. His subsequent increase in the military budget to 2.5 percent of GDP made the nation the fourth largest spender in the world by 2022, behind only the United States, the PRC, and the Russian Federation. Superficially, Indian capabilities were impressive. The missile force had ranges of between 250 and 500 kilometres, and longer-range weapons are under development.

The Indian army has more than 1.2 million effectives, and the navy and air force together another 210,000 or so. The reserves total 1.15 million. The army has nearly 3,700 main battle tanks, the navy 17 submarines, 10 destroyers, 17 frigates, and an aircraft carrier. India also has a nuclear weapons capability. Its inventory of 156 atomic bombs is the seventh largest in the world, just behind Pakistan's, but substantially bigger than Israel's.[30]

Moreover, the Indian economy was now stronger than it had been since the early eighteenth century—the fifth largest in the world in dollar terms, and larger still in terms of purchasing power parity. In the early 2020s, the country even overtook the United Kingdom, its former colonial power. India was also blessed with a vibrant civilian tech and communications community, which placed it in a strong position to benefit from advances in artificial intelligence. India therefore certainly had the resources to be a Great Power in the military sense if it could find a way to mobilise them.[31]

Despite this, India still lacked modern equipment in such basic categories as armoured vehicles, aircraft, artillery, and naval vessels. Much of this was still being imported from abroad, mainly from Russia. Dependence on Russian technology could limit India's options in a prolonged confrontation with the PRC, especially if Moscow opted for Beijing over New Delhi. Modi's 'Make in India' policy had done little to develop the indigenous arms industry. As in the past, bureaucratic inertia,

procurement delays, and political caution have slowed the translation of economic technological potential into hard military power. India's air lift, air assault, and amphibious capabilities are not trivial, but they are by no means comparable to those of the Great Powers. India is thus militarily far too weak to contemplate a full-blown confrontation with its greatest rival, the People's Republic of China. The poor performance of Indian equipment against Pakistan's PRC-supplied jets and missiles during the short conflict in May 2025 was a warning of what might lie ahead.[32]

It is an equally mixed picture with regard to India's international reach. It has long asserted a sphere of influence in its immediate surroundings. In 2014, Modi proclaimed a policy of 'Neighbourhood First'. This relationship is often couched in terms of 'co-development'—for example, in Modi's early 'Red Fort' speech of 2014—but it is primarily geopolitical. India insists that it should act as 'first responder' and 'security provider' for its wider neighbourhood.

To the north and east, India has traditionally dominated the bordering states, both economically and militarily. New Delhi has sponsored numerous regional infrastructural projects, including road and rail projects which knit the region closer together. It is, or was until recently, everyone's largest trading partner in the region. Geopolitically, India dominated Nepal and Bhutan; the former contained an Indian base to train its armed forces, while the latter was long committed by treaty to consulting with New Delhi on matters of foreign policy. Ever since 1971, Indian influence in Bangladesh has been strong. Bangladesh's minister in charge of Liberation War veterans and commemoration, Mozammel Haque, spoke of 'a deep-rooted bond written in blood' between the two countries, and in 2022 the Bangladeshi prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, said she wanted the 'friendship to last forever'. In May 2015, early in his first term, Prime Minister Modi settled the border dispute with Bangladesh.

To the south, India regards the Indian Ocean as a vital area of interest. Shortly before independence, the great-grandfather of Indian grand strategy, the diplomat K. M. Panikkar, laid down that the country's security depended on 'the Indian ocean remain[ing] truly Indian'. Now 80 percent of the country's crude oil imports and 95 percent of its trade passes through the waters there. This commerce is vulnerable to piracy at the western end

—nearly five hundred Indian seamen were taken hostage by Somali raiders between 2007 and 2011—and to infiltration by the Chinese navy at its eastern end. For this reason, India has tried to keep hostile foreign powers out of the region.[33]

India also enjoys some global reach, both horizontally and vertically. Its diaspora, which is the responsibility of the Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, is more and more important in key Western countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom. Modi has made great play with it, frequently speaking to mass meetings abroad, often in Hindi. He has also cast India as the civilisational defender of Indian faith groups overseas, including Muslims, and religion more generally. This activity has been flanked by an increasingly brutal campaign against dissidents abroad. For example, in September 2023, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau of Canada accused India of being behind the killing of a Sikh independence activist in Surrey, British Columbia, that June. Perhaps more remarkable than the event itself was the reluctance of Western leaders to condemn the alleged action so as not to antagonise a potential ally against China.[34]

At another level entirely, India pursues a vibrant space programme. In August 2023, it made an unmanned landing on the dark side of the moon. Modi framed this success as one for all mankind. ‘Our approach of one earth, one family, one future is resonating across the globe,’ he claimed. ‘This success belongs to all humanity.’ But everyone knew that the Indian triumph was also a stepping-stone towards further advances, perhaps including a landing on Mars.[35]

By the early 2020s, though, India’s geopolitical reach was increasingly in question, even in its own neighbourhood. Chinese penetration and local patriotism had weakened New Delhi’s grip on the states on her northern and eastern borders. In 2007, India agreed for the first time that Bhutan should be allowed to decide its own foreign policy. New Delhi expressed unhappiness at revisions to Nepal’s constitution which seemed to suggest a more independent attitude. This provoked Shankar Sharma, Nepal’s former envoy to the United States, to warn India against the ‘micromanagement of neighbouring countries’. By 2006, the PRC had already surpassed India to become Bangladesh’s biggest trading partner. Moreover, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s close relationship with India was the subject of fierce

domestic criticism and in 2024 resulted in the creation of a new opposition movement whose slogan is ‘India Out’. Her resignation in August of that year following the popular protests was a severe blow for New Delhi.[36]

In the Indian Ocean, India struggles to cope with the PRC threat on its own. Buoyed by Chinese economic support, President Mohamed Muizzu of the Maldives launched an ‘India Out’ campaign in October 2020. This is why India conducts joint exercises with the United States and Japan—code-named ‘Malabar’—in the region. Finally, India never really got to grips with its immediate neighbour to the west—Pakistan—and the attempts to ‘leapfrog’ that country through good relations with Afghanistan were jeopardised by the return of the Taliban in August 2021.

India’s position in its immediate neighbourhood was also weakened by the absence of any supranational regulatory body like the European Union, the North American Free Trade Agreement, or even the Eurasian Union which it could dominate. It is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the BRICS, but it has resolutely blocked Russian and Chinese attempts to turn these institutions into viable alternatives to Western ones.

India’s wider reach is severely limited by a variety of factors. Its diplomatic service is small, even in absolute terms, and tiny in relation to the size of the country. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the Indian Foreign Ministry was roughly the same size as that of New Zealand. The country has little military capacity—neither the naval forces nor the aerial ‘lift’—to engage beyond the Indian Ocean. As for the Indian diaspora, this is substantial, but so widely dispersed that it does not represent the same resource for New Delhi as, say, the Russians living in the Baltic states and Central Asia do for the Kremlin.[37]

In reputational terms, India has had some of the attributes of Great Power status. It has been unconditionally accepted—even boosted—by Russia as a major actor on the world scene. It has also been intensely courted by the United States as a partner in the governance of the world. India has been seen in some quarters as a civilisational power and an inspiration for the Global South. Its traditional universalism—epitomised by Modi’s claim that ‘the whole world is one family’—was contrasted favourably with the PRC’s tradition of hierarchy. Its soft power was also

formidable. ‘Bollywood’ movies, for example, are admired across South-East Asia. So are Indian cuisine, Indian literature, India’s digital services, and the country’s leadership of the International Solar Alliance, which seeks to address climate change through solar energy.[38]

There was, however, also considerable scepticism towards Indian claims. The recognition which New Delhi desired most, that of equality with the PRC, was firmly withheld by Beijing. Indeed, the gulf between the two powers was growing. Even the attention lavished on India by the West was based on the (mistaken) assumption that India would become a custodian of the liberal international order, rather than on an acceptance of its claim to represent a distinct principle in the world. There was also a widespread feeling that India’s dismal performance in the field of human development—the continuing poverty, the millions of COVID deaths, and the endemic communal violence—made it, as the French newspaper *Le Monde* put it, ‘a world power with feet of clay’. The French economist Thomas Piketty even suggested that economic inequality in India was greater in 2024 than it had been during the British Raj.[39]

India is, in its current configuration, still a relatively young country, making it difficult to assess its resilience as a global actor. On the one hand, India is deeply divided between Hindu and Muslim and between rich and poor. Among the armed groups threatening the country are Maoist Naxalites, Sikh and Kashmiri separatists, and various secessionists in the far north-east. Even at its core, India is, as Modi’s great rival Rahul Gandhi once suggested, less of a nation than a union of states in constant negotiation with one another. With its many languages, religions, and identities, India resembles the European Union; its continued existence is an achievement in itself.[40]

On the other hand, India has historically been capable of great political and societal endurance. The country cohered during the bloodshed of partition and independence and has fought a number of hot wars against its neighbours, principally Pakistan. It recovered from defeat at the hands of China in 1962. Thanks to the dimensions of the country, and the size and forbearance of its population, the country is inherently stable underneath its surface chaos. India is thus practically indestructible from the outside. It can only be destroyed by itself.

Today, India is not yet a Great Power. To be sure, its economy is projected by some to be the second largest in the world by 2050, and to overtake China's before the end of the century. Even if that were to happen, though, this would not automatically lead to a matching increase in global heft. The country is already rich enough and now spends sufficient money on its military to theoretically project power at the scale of the United Kingdom and Russia, for example, but it is in practice far from being able to do so.

Either way, India's geopolitical orientation will not change. On the one hand, it is unlikely for historical, cultural, and geopolitical reasons to become a part of the West. New Delhi will not easily abandon Moscow, and despite recent economic growth, Hindu nationalism is deeply sceptical of globalisation. Moreover, India wants recognition of its status, not responsibility for co-managing the liberal world order. On the other hand, the country cannot, on account of its enmity with the PRC, fully join the Sino-Russian partnership. For this reason, India will continue to cast itself as the avatar of the 'Global South', but in reality it presents as a completely separate global 'pole', a civilisation unto itself.

The problem is that for all the strides India has made, the PRC has made even greater ones, and the gulf between them appears to be widening. Over the past twenty years, China has pulled ahead in almost every sector, including naval tonnage, missile technology, infrastructural projects (such as the Belt and Road Initiative), AI innovation, and GDP growth. It is now Beijing, rather than the Western powers of the United States, Britain, and France, which is withholding the status recognition New Delhi so desperately craves. India watches with growing concern as Chinese money, technology, and diplomacy penetrate many of its border states and large swathes of the Indian Ocean. The new PRC military facilities in places like Djibouti, much magnified in the imagination, constitute a 'string of pearls' which 'encircle' India; this anxiety was recently aggravated by London's decision to hand the Chagos Islands over to Mauritius, which may not wish or be able to keep China at arm's length.[41]

Nobody knows how India will respond to these challenges, but experience suggests that the country is deeply risk averse. For all the rhetoric, Modi has prevaricated in the face of Chinese aggression. The reduction in his parliamentary majority at the 2024 election will probably

accentuate New Delhi's caution. If there is a great danger that India's demons—communal violence, separatism, and economic inequality—will lead to civil strife, the likelihood of these expressing themselves in aggressive war or foreign policy adventures is remote.

In the end, the greatest challenge to India's ambitions is internal: The country's enduring human development deficiencies, its poverty and corruption, are a huge handicap. If India does not capitalise quickly on its 'demographic dividend'—that is, a large working-age population in relation to older dependents—the danger of 'peak India', of a retreat from the current heights, is very real. The increasingly radical Hindu nationalism of the Modi government is a force which risks tearing the country apart at the very moment when it needs to unite, and for cultural reasons, India lacks the 'power instinct' necessary to achieve Great Power status. Until it can resolve these problems, India will never be more than a 'potential' Great Power.

Nine

The Failure of the European Union

THE EUROPEAN UNION was born out of geopolitical conflict in the aftermath of the Second World War and during the onset of the East-West confrontation, but it took wing in what many Europeans believed to be a post-geopolitical and post–Great Power world after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This ‘holiday from history’ lasted nearly twenty-five years, a whole generation. Of course, while the EU deprioritised hard power, it did exercise geopolitical influence through trade policy, enlargement, and mediation. Today, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen speaks of heading a ‘Geopolitical Commission’. This is in response to challenges from China, Iran, Russia, and to a certain extent also the United States. Clearly, the Great Powers have returned. But is the EU a Great Power, does it want to be one, and does it even know what a Great Power is? This chapter will show that the EU is built for a different world and that it struggles, thanks to its peculiar constitutional structure, to bring the formidable potential of the continent to bear against the Great Powers threatening its very existence.[1]

Europe has been a Great Power for hundreds of years, but only in the minds of its dreamers and dictators. In the Middle Ages and the early modern period, ‘Christendom’ claimed a common project in containing the advance of the Ottoman Turks. Writers and statesmen, including various popes, advanced a ‘war project’ designed to mobilise the continent on this basis. After the final Turkish assault on Vienna was seen off at the end of the seventeenth century, however, the Ottoman threat became less acute. European integration now became a ‘peace project’ designed to defuse the

internal tensions on the continent. The eighteenth-century French writer and reformer Charles-Irénée Castel, abbé de Saint-Pierre, for example, published a plan for a ‘Perpetual Peace in Europe’ which sought a ‘treaty to establish a perpetual European Union’. In fact, for the next hundred years or so, most Europeans were unable even to conceive that their continent might be challenged from outside.[2]

In the early nineteenth century, the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte falsely claimed to unite Europe against the British plans to lord it over the continent economically. He even spoke of a ‘United States of Europe’. His Continental System can be seen as an embryonic European economic union, his Grande Armée as a European collective security system, and his Napoleonic Code as the ground rules for a pan-European system of public law and administration. In the twentieth century, after failing to win over the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, Adolf Hitler tried to rally the continent at the point of a gun against the British Empire, the United States, and the Soviet Union. In both instances, of course, European unity was primarily a vehicle for perpetuating national supremacy, first of France and then of Germany. In both instances, too, the plan to ‘unite’ the continent plunged Europe into devastating wars and ended in complete failure. And in both cases, the protagonists brought Russian power into the heart of Europe.[3]

This was the context in which the project of European integration, which had been a niche aspiration during the interwar period, re-emerged after the defeat of Nazism. It was a peace project in that it sought to transcend the Franco-German antagonism and to make Germany structurally incapable of ever again committing aggression by creating a supranational agency to control the production of steel—a vital military commodity—in both Germany and France. It was a war project in that it attempted to mobilise the democratic half of the continent, including West Germany, to deter the Soviet Union. It was an economic and political project which sought to reconstruct Europe after a devastating war and to spread prosperity and democracy as a bulwark against communism. The United States was fully supportive of all three aims, primarily because it hoped thereby to reduce the cost it would otherwise have to bear in defending Europe. The European project was in its essence a flight from history—from complicity and lack of sovereignty in the German case, and from impotence in the case of the

rest of mainland Europe. The European Union has deep historical roots precisely because it is so recent. It was founded against its own past.[4]

This, alongside fears that European integration would harm its global trade and Commonwealth ties, was the main reason why Britain was initially sceptical. In its view, the European Union was designed to address the problem of German aggression and European weakness—not to deal with a British problem. Nobody claimed after 1945 that the United Kingdom had been such a danger to European peace that it required a continent-wide supranational structure to embed and contain it. Nor did anyone argue that the United Kingdom, which had played a major role in liberating Europe from Nazism, had been so feeble in the face of a threat from others that it needed the protection of a supranational body. As Jean Monnet, the father of European integration, remarked, 'Britain had not been conquered or invaded' and thus 'felt no need to excoriate history'. Any loss of sovereignty entailed by joining in European integration could therefore not be justified.[5]

The initial hope of the protagonists of European integration, and their American sponsors, was to establish a United States of Europe. This plan came unstuck as the national states, especially France, reasserted themselves. In 1954, the French National Assembly vetoed the American-supported proposal for a European Defence Community as a first step to a supranational political union. Three years later, the Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community (EEC)—a customs union and common market—for France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. Britain stayed aloof at first. Thus began the divergence between economic and security integration, with the latter henceforth resting entirely with NATO. The EEC, as the historian Alan Milward memorably put it, had 'rescued the European nation state'. This development ensured that 'Europe' would not acquire any of the military attributes of Great Powerness.[6]

Washington watched with irritation. It had been unhappy with European protectionism but prepared to tolerate trade discrimination so long as it was accompanied by political integration. Now the Americans were frustrated that despite their constant urging the Europeans had failed to integrate politically and militarily, thus leaving them with the lion's share of the

burden of defending the continent. In time, though, US administrations, such as that of Richard Nixon, became more suspicious of European unity, especially when it was economically directed against them. In March 1973, the cover of *Time* magazine went so far as to proclaim Europe as 'America's new rival'. Even so, Nixon's national security advisor and later secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, sometimes bemoaned the lack of a common European position on grand strategy. 'Who do I call when I want to speak to Europe?', he supposedly asked.[7]

This American ambivalence was to endure. It wanted European trade unity and military cooperation as a bulwark against the Soviet Union, but worried that a more autonomous continent would drift out of the US orbit and undermine the common cause against communism. To this day, American governments, including the first and second Trump administrations, have simultaneously wanted more European defence burden-sharing, feared European trade protectionism, and fretted that Europe might become a separate global pole inimical to US national interests.

Over the fifty years following its founding in 1957, the European Economic Community evolved first into the European Community and then into the European Union. In 1973, the United Kingdom, the Republic of Ireland, and Denmark joined. This was followed in 1981 by the accession of Greece, and in 1986 by that of Spain and Portugal. The end of the Cold War made it possible for Sweden, Finland, and Austria to join in 1995. There was then a nearly ten-year gap until Poland, the three Baltic states, Malta, and Cyprus acceded in 2004. Three years later, it was the turn of Bulgaria and Romania, and in 2013 Croatia was admitted. At its peak in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the EU covered almost the entire continent outside of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.

Each of these enlargements, which were at the request of the joining states, followed its own rationale. The accession of Britain was designed to increase the Union's economic and strategic heft, and to fill what was widely perceived to be a gap in the original project. The southern enlargements were primarily intended to consolidate the new members' transition to democracy after authoritarian rule. The admission of Austria and the two Nordic states was a post–Cold War tidying-up operation, and

the eastern expansion after 2004 was intended to anchor the post-communist states in Western institutions. Though economic growth also played a significant role, geopolitics was even more important. At the same time, rapid enlargement—particularly to the less well-developed east—brought economic disparities, institutional strains, new geopolitical frontiers, and thus new challenges.

The European Union ‘widened’, but it also ‘deepened’. In the 1980s, the Schengen Area was established to enable travel across the boundaries of participating member states. The Single European Act of 1986 laid the groundwork for the creation of the European single market, which provided for goods, services, capital, and people to move freely within the EU. In the 1990s the single market was completed, at the end of the decade a Common Foreign and Security Policy was proclaimed, and in 2002 the long-planned common currency, the euro, went into physical circulation. Wim Duisenberg, the first president of the European Central Bank (ECB), described the euro as ‘the first currency that has not only severed its link to gold but also its link to the nation state’. A series of treaties, at Maastricht (1992), Amsterdam (1997), Nice (2001), and Lisbon (2007), increased the competencies of the Union.[8]

During this period, the EU began to think and act strategically, albeit with hesitation. The first European Security Strategy was published in 2003. In 2004, the EU set up the European Defence Agency in order to develop European crisis management capabilities and promote cooperation on armaments production. Three years later, it brought out its Integrated Maritime Policy. In 2008, the EU made its debut as a maritime power by launching Operation Atalanta against piracy in Somali waters off East Africa. A European External Action Service, the EU diplomatic corps, was established in 2009. The first ‘high representative’ of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, was appointed that same year, in accordance with the Lisbon Treaty. The EU claimed that this had finally answered the ‘Kissinger Question’ of whom one called when one wanted to speak with Europe.[9]

During this period, the European Union’s main strategic tools were not military but economic, legal, and territorial: aid, trade, and sanctions, each most powerful in the EU’s neighbourhood. The European Security Strategy

argued that the EU would be best protected through the establishment of a ‘world of well-governed democratic states’. ‘Spreading good governance’, the strategy continued, ‘supporting social and political reform, dealing with corruption and abuse of power, establishing the rule of law and protecting human rights are the best means of strengthening the international order.’ In other words, the EU pursued ‘milieu’ rather than geopolitical goals, and it did so with considerable success, exercising a powerful gravitational pull on its neighbours well in advance of actual accession as these countries readied themselves for their membership bids.[10]

What the European Union did not do was to transform itself either into a Great Power or a super-state; in fact, it was not a state at all. Neither fears of German domination after unification in 1990, nor the Wars of the Yugoslav Succession in the 1990s, nor the Global War on Terror after 2001 created sufficient momentum behind German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer’s 2000 demand for a full political union to equip the continent for the challenges ahead. He wanted Europe to have a common fiscal policy as well as common border forces and military forces, but this was opposed by most of the continent’s elites and the majority of its population because of concerns for national sovereignty, diverging threat perceptions, and fears of fiscal transfers.[11]

As the second decade of the twenty-first century drew to a close, the European Union had many of the attributes of statehood, including a common currency, a passportless travel area, a single market and customs union, and a joint foreign and security policy. It lacked, however, a common economic government, a common debt to sustain its common currency, an effective common border guard to safeguard the Schengen Area, and a common army to support the common security policy. In other words, the EU had aspirations towards political union, but gave itself only confederal instruments to achieve them.

In part, this reflected the long-standing divide within Europe between inter-governmentalists and supranationalists. The former were opposed to full political union and looked to the Franco-German ‘engine’, or some other member-state combination, to keep the European show on the road. The supranationalists were divided. The prevailing view advanced the gradualist argument that a United States of Europe would be built *peu a peu*

in a series of small steps. Political union, they argued, would not accompany monetary and fiscal union, but complete it. It would be the crowning moment, not the point of departure, the process seemingly a goal in itself rather than a means to an end.

To some, the advantage of a long process was that it would enable the unification of Europe without provoking too much alarm among the peoples of the continent. ‘We decide on something’, the president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, famously remarked, ‘and wait to see what happens.’ ‘If no-one kicks up a fuss,’ he continued, ‘because most people don’t understand what has been decided, we continue step by step until there is no turning back.’ The result of this approach was a steady alienation of many ordinary Europeans from the institutions that were supposed to represent and protect them.[12]

Supranationalist critics argued that, contrary to EU lore and culture, successful unions resulted not from gradual processes of convergence in relatively benign circumstances, or through stealth, but through sharp ruptures in periods of extreme crisis. As in the Anglo-American cases, they had come about not through evolution, or subterfuge, but openly with a ‘big bang’ (though the US example was more gradual than the British one). These critics predicted that the gradualist political integration strategy was a long-term engagement which would end not in marriage but in tears.[13]

With the peaceful unification of Germany and the end of the Cold War, the European project appeared to have lost its original geopolitical function, and in fact, many thought that the very notion of ‘geopolitics’ was redundant in a ‘globalising’ world that was moving inexorably towards its inevitable liberal-democratic endpoint. The European Union became a post-geopolitical space in which European history and traditional Great Power rivalries had been transcended, in a world where there was only one hegemon, the United States. The EU, which was growing by leaps and bounds, genuinely did not think of itself as expansionist, and therefore could not understand that it might be regarded as such by others, especially Russia. It would transform Europe and its neighbourhood not just by what it *did*, but by what it *was*.

That said, there were already some worrying signs. Despite the Luxembourgian foreign minister Jacques Poos declaring the ‘Hour of Europe’ in 1991, and demanding that the United States take a back seat to the EU with regard to Yugoslavia, the initial EU peace mission in 1991–1992 was an abject failure. The United Kingdom pointedly refused to join the euro and secured important ‘opt-outs’ in the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, the document which laid the groundwork for the European common currency, and which strengthened the powers of the European Parliament and foreign policy and security cooperation. Then Europe was sidelined militarily by the United States, or sidelined itself, during the Kosovo War. The continent was divided over whether to support the invasion of Iraq in 2003, with Britain, Spain, and Italy supporting America and France and Germany opposed.

Europe was also in disagreement about Russia, which was widely regarded as a threat in Eastern and Northern Europe after the cyberattack on Estonia in 2007 and the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Despite all this, in 2010 the EU launched its ‘Partnership for Modernisation’ with Russia, which spoke optimistically of the two polities as ‘long-standing strategic partners’ that would ‘address common challenges’ on the basis of ‘democracy and the rule of law, both at the national and the international level’. Shortly after, a European consortium moved ahead with Nord Stream II, the plan to pipe more gas directly from Russia to Germany across the Baltic Sea.[14]

Moreover, there was strong evidence of ‘Euro-fatigue’ among various electorates: in Britain, where ‘Euroscepticism’ was on the rise; in the Republic of Ireland, where the Nice and Lisbon treaties, which increased EU competencies, were voted down in referendums at their first presentation (albeit on a low turnout); and in France and the Netherlands, which rejected the proposed European Constitution in 2005. There was little appetite for giving up the nation-state either suddenly, as the Anglo-American model would have required, or gradually, as the Brussels elite envisaged. In fact, there was a widespread sense of a ‘democratic deficit’ on the continent, as populations felt increasingly remote from ‘Brussels’. The celebrated German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger even spoke of the ‘Disenfranchisement of Europe’ by the ‘Gentle Brussels Monster’.[15]

This Euroscepticism was and is a very diverse phenomenon, and its drivers differed sharply across states. In the United Kingdom, for example, sovereignty and immigration from other member states were the primary concerns. In Ireland, the worry was that the EU posed a threat to the country's traditional policy of neutrality. In France and other countries, economic and social fears were salient. Whereas in some countries, such as France, the opposition came mainly from the left, in the United Kingdom it was largely led by the right.

Economically, too, a storm was brewing. First of all, trade imbalances in the Eurozone ballooned, and risky lending practices created property bubbles and facilitated ballooning state debts on the periphery of the common currency area, especially in the Republic of Ireland, Greece, and Spain. Second, the continent as a whole was becoming less competitive and losing ground globally, leading to loss of competitiveness and inflation. This was due to the inflationary effects of the euro, rigid EU labour markets, underinvestment in productive sectors such as technology, and overspending on social consumption through welfare state benefits. The same structures that 'protected' European economies also sheltered them, at least for now, from the need to innovate and adapt.

In the decade after the turn of the millennium, in fact, Europe's share of world GDP dropped by more than 6 percent—from 26.5 to 20 percent—and by more if purchasing power parity is considered. Nowhere was this more evident than in relation to the People's Republic of China, which had become the EU's second largest trading partner, after the United States, in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It was unsustainable, as German Chancellor Angela Merkel would soon point out, for a continent which had 7 percent of the world's population, and 25 percent of its GDP, to account for half of global welfare spending. For those who looked closely, Europe's power was manifestly declining.[16]

The EU was thus ill-equipped to handle the onset of economic and fiscal crisis. In the aftermath of the global financial crisis in 2008, the structural flaws of the euro were progressively exposed. Small peripheral economies, such as those of Greece, the Republic of Ireland, and Portugal, experienced the bursting of property bubbles and consequent bank failures. Larger polities, such as Italy and France, were also vulnerable, as a result of long-

standing deficits and high levels of state indebtedness. A series of bailouts and painful ‘reform’ packages from 2009 through 2011 failed to contain the threat. Because they did not control their own currencies, and therefore could not devalue or ‘print money’, national governments were limited in their ability to respond. They thus enjoyed less flexibility than administrations in Washington and London.[17]

The EU was also constrained because it had no common debt or economic government. Germany and most of Northern Europe resisted the introduction of Anglo-American style ‘eurobonds’, backed like US and UK treasury bonds by the entire Union, which would have stabilised the situation but made the richer half of the continent responsible for what it regarded as the irresponsible debts of its poorer half. Anti-German sentiment, and claims of domination by Berlin, soared across Europe. For a time, the future of the common currency, and with it that of the EU in general, seemed in doubt. Only when the head of the ECB, Mario Draghi, promised in July 2012 to do ‘whatever it takes’ to preserve the euro—adding ‘and believe me it will be enough’—did the emergency pass, though the underlying causes remained unaddressed.[18]

Despite its travails, the European Union was still a formidable economic force. In 2010, its GDP totalled $18.6 trillion, ahead of the United States’ GDP at $15 trillion and China’s at $6 trillion. ‘Even with only 7 percent of the world population,’ the president of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, boasted, ‘we still generate about 22 percent of the world’s wealth.’ ‘This’, he continued, ‘is compared to about 21 percent for the US, 11.5 percent for China and 4.7 percent for India.’ ‘Together’, van Rompuy argued, ‘we are the first commercial power in the world, bigger than the US, China or Japan.’[19]

So, at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the European Union, despite the rumbling currency crisis, was contemplating the future with some optimism. It took from its more than fifty-year past a mandate to rally the continent as a single-market power and to leverage that strength on the world stage. What it did not take from history was any traditional Great Power mission, for which it in any case lacked the capabilities. Security was still largely a reserved matter for member states and was subcontracted to NATO. It was telling that the largely dormant

Western European Union, the last remnant of European supranational military integration, was disbanded in 2011. As the continent disarmed in quest of the ‘peace dividend’, reliance on America through NATO increased. For now, this did not seem to matter. In an age of ‘geo-economics’, the EU appeared generally well configured to deal with what seemed to be the global challenges of the age: terrorism, migration, climate change, and globalisation. In a post–Great Power world, what need did the European Union have to be a Great Power?

The question of whether the European Union was, could, or should be a Great Power had been much discussed in the three decades after the end of the Cold War, particularly by scholars and commentators. Whereas the eminent Harvard political scientist Andrew Moravcsik had regarded it in 1998 as a ‘liberal intergovernmental organisation’ dominated by its Great Power members, ten years later he was describing Europe as the ‘Quiet Superpower’ next to the other, presumably louder superpower, the United States. Mark Leonard, the founder and director of the European Council on Foreign Relations, predicted in 2005 that Europe would ‘run the twenty-first century’. Today, the European Union is frequently seen as a Great Power in the various rankings and by the scholarly policy complex which has emerged to study it. In October 2021, French finance minister Bruno Le Maire demanded that Washington recognise the EU as the geopolitical equal of the United States and the People’s Republic of China.[20]

Others see the EU not as a Great Power in the traditional sense, but as a new type of ‘normative power’. On this reading, its authority stretches well beyond that of its formal boundaries because many states voluntarily accept its standards—on safety, the environment, and data protection, for example—in order to sell into the single market. New members are obliged to accept all the *acquis communautaire*, or body of law, the more than twenty thousand laws and regulations that have been passed since the EU’s creation, most of them relating to the single market. The EU, in short, can do what few other actors can, which is to change the whole nature of a country—at its own request—in order to bring it into line with its fellow member states.[21]

The European Union itself—the institutions based in Brussels—does not use the language of Great Powerness. It enjoys ‘competencies’ rather than ‘powers’, and the European Commission speaks of the EU as a ‘market’ and a ‘norm setter’. The EU’s Strategic Compass, which was issued in late March 2022 in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and seeks to provide a shared assessment of the challenges facing EU members, claimed that ‘our Union remains the world’s biggest single market’ and is a key ‘norm setter’. A more accurate name for the EU might therefore be ‘Single Market State’. It is a ‘Market Power’, a ‘Market State’, not a ‘Power State’—a *Marktstaat* rather than a *Machtstaat*.[22]

Despite this, the European Union does think of itself as a distinct ‘pole’ in the world. Its Partnership for Modernisation with Russia, for example, referred to the EU as an actor in ‘a changing multipolar world’. In 2022, the European Parliament noted the EU’s ambition to have ‘the capacity to act autonomously—that is, without being dependent on other countries—in strategically important areas’. ‘These’, the statement continued, ‘can range from defence policy to the economy, and the capacity to uphold democratic values.’ By its own definition, therefore, the European Union may not be a Great Power, but it is very much a global ‘pole’. How it could be the one and not the other is a question which would surface time and again in the second and third decades of the twenty-first century.[23]

From 2014, the European Union was plunged into five major ordering struggles, each of them critical to the future of the continent. First, there was the geopolitical contest with the territorially expansionist Russia of Vladimir Putin. This was followed by the demographic and political question of how the huge numbers of refugees fleeing civil war and poverty across the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa should be contained, or at least managed. Then there was the economic and legal confrontation with the United Kingdom during the Brexit negotiations. This was accompanied by an economic struggle with the first Trump administration, which appeared to escalate into a full-scale geopolitical rupture at the start of his second presidency. Finally, there was the economic and geopolitical standoff with the People’s Republic of China. The EU had great difficulties

in dealing with each one of these crises, prompting widespread fears of its collapse.[24]

The Russian annexation of Crimea in mid-March 2014 and Moscow's invasion of Eastern Ukraine later that summer dramatically changed the security environment of the European Union. Its eastern and northern flanks were now directly threatened by Vladimir Putin. For Poland, the three Baltic states, Finland, Sweden, and Romania, the threat of Russia became the security priority. There was also the question of Europe's energy supply, given the importance of Russian oil and gas to many member-state economies, especially Germany's. Great Power competition had returned to the European continent.

Towards the end of 2015, Europe was thrown into renewed turmoil by the approach of more than a million mainly Syrian refugees fleeing the brutality of the Assad regime. They traversed Greece and the Balkans until being stopped temporarily by Viktor Orban's Hungarian border guards. To resolve the resulting humanitarian crisis, Chancellor Merkel decided to admit the bulk of them into the Federal Republic, and subsequently tried to redistribute a proportion across the rest of the European Union. This sparked widespread resistance, especially in Eastern Europe, which resented being made jointly liable for Germany's unilateral decision. Whatever the merits of the chancellor's move, it did make clear that running a passportless travel area was not sustainable unless its external boundaries could be secured.

Then, in June 2016, Europe was stunned when the United Kingdom voted to leave the European Union. This was a stinging blow to the EU's pride: If Europeans believed that the departure of Greece would have reflected badly on Greece, they feared that the departure of Britain meant there was something wrong with them. Brexit also threatened to deprive the EU of about 20 percent of its economic capability, and something like 40 percent of its deployable combat power. Less quantifiable, but also serious, was the loss of a defence industrial base, intelligence assets, and global diplomatic clout. All of these were still available to the continent through NATO, of course, but the idea of an effective separate European foreign and security policy suffered a serious blow. There was also widespread fear of 'contagion', that the British vote would precipitate a wider rush for the exit.

More generally, there was the issue of how the two Unions, the European Union and the United Kingdom, should be disentangled, and what role, if any, the latter would play in the European order in the future.[25]

The shock of Brexit was compounded in November 2016 by Donald Trump's victory in the US presidential election. He signalled that the United States would renegotiate its 'unfair' trading arrangements not only with China but with the European Union, an institution which Trump held in manifest contempt. Worse, the new president believed that America was being 'taken advantage of' by its allies, and cast doubt on US willingness to honour its Article 5 NATO guarantee to protect those countries, which were, in his view, not spending enough on their own defence. The new president also believed that Europe was overly dependent on Russian energy. He demanded that European states buy American liquefied natural gas, and imposed sanctions on the companies involved in Nord Stream. A cold wind was blowing from Washington, and the question now was whether the EU would be able to secure the continent in the absence of American support.

If Europe was reluctant to be drawn into the looming trade confrontation between the United States and the People's Republic of China, the relationship with Beijing was already beginning to deteriorate. Brussels had been nervous about Chinese competition and trade practices for some time. For example, Chinese state subsidies had effectively destroyed Europe's flourishing solar panel industry. Now the European Commission, and many member states, began to fret about Chinese technological penetration—for example, by the ubiquitous telecommunications giant Huawei—and about Beijing's challenges to EU norms on data protection, cybersecurity, and governance standards in international bodies. They also worried about the growth of PRC influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, which involved the purchase of large quantities of European critical infrastructure, especially ports. This vulnerability was aggravated by Europe's dependency on China for the supply of 'rare earths' vital to the green transition.[26]

As with Russia, Europe was divided about how to deal with the PRC. There were large industrial lobbies, such as car manufacturers and producers of luxury goods, that were heavily dependent on the Chinese market. Other industries felt threatened by Chinese competition. Some European countries, such as Poland and increasingly Germany, were highly

critical of Chinese human rights policies, others much less so. Italy, for example, joined the Belt and Road Initiative; Hungary, which sympathised with China's authoritarianism, blocked EU resolutions critical of Beijing. In 2019, though, the European Union did achieve enough consensus to label the PRC a 'systemic rival', signalling a significant change in tone.

Then the European Union, like the rest of the world, was surprised by the onset of the COVID pandemic in February 2020. COVID posed a particular threat to Brussels, because so much of the EU's identity and practice depended on the maintenance of free movement to settle in another member state, and on passportless travel within the Schengen Area. In March 2020, barriers went up again across the continent as borders closed and governments competed for supplies of scarce personal protective equipment. Solidarity turned out to be in short supply, at least initially. The speed with which border controls were reinstated undermined the EU's image as a borderless space. Worse still, because public health was largely a national competence, the EU itself was somewhat sidelined at the start of the crisis, and was shown to lack a centralised crisis-response mechanism to deal with sudden shocks. It was for this reason that Brussels threw itself into the task of developing an effective vaccine against the virus.

These challenges came in addition to those that were already wracking the European Union. The euro crisis rumbled on, with another Greek crisis in the summer of 2015, when the country once again seemed on the verge of leaving the common currency. Economic growth on the continent remained sluggish; the effects of the financial crisis and austerity lingered. Many member states faced Islamist terrorist attacks, especially France, Germany, and Belgium. Moreover, all of these threats, old and new, also had a powerful domestic dimension, and they all interacted with each other. The EU's green agenda, and member-state net-zero obligations, meant increased reliance on Russian energy imports and Chinese solar panels and electric vehicles. The remoteness of the EU institutions, and the increase in immigration and terrorism, served to boost support for radical parties. Popular support for further EU enlargement plummeted.

In rhetorical terms, the European reaction to the challenges the continent faced after 2014 was formidable. The annexation of Crimea was roundly

criticised, Brexit and Trump roundly condemned. ‘Populism’ was excoriated. As we have seen, several major actors spoke of ‘Europe’ charting a new path independent of a no-longer-reliable United States (and Britain). In the member states, European ‘unity’ was invoked, over and over again. There was also an escalation in rhetoric from Brussels. In 2014, the new commission president, Jean-Claude Juncker, spoke of leading a ‘Political Commission’. This was meant to distance him from charges of ‘technocracy’ and signalled his hope that the Union could address some of the democratic deficit causing so much disquiet across the continent. The *Spitzenkandidaten* process, which linked the presidency of the commission to the European parliamentary elections, was intended as a step in that direction.

A year later, the EU commissioned a Global Strategy overseen by Federica Mogherini, the high representative for foreign affairs and security policy. This document was published in the summer of 2016, just after the Brexit referendum. Mogherini warned that the ‘purpose, even existence of our Union [was] being questioned’, that the EU no longer was or could be an ‘exclusively “civilian” power’, and that the EU had ‘to cope with superpowers’, a nod towards the return of geopolitics. To do this, she argued, the EU not only needed a ‘strategy’ but also ‘strategic autonomy’. In the same spirit, when Ursula von der Leyen took office as president of the European Commission in December 2019, she promised a ‘Geopolitical Commission’. This was intended to show that the EU had grasped the change in the international environment and was ready to deal with the new Great Power world.[27]

That said, the EU was still focused on its traditional ‘milieu’ aims of improving the broader international environment, rather than confronting geopolitical realities and making hard choices. The Global Strategy distanced Brussels from its earlier focus on democracy and human rights, to be sure, but the emphasis was still on promoting a ‘rules-based global order with multilateralism as its key principle and the United Nations at its core’. ‘As a union of medium to small sized countries’, the strategy document continued, ‘we have a shared European interest in facing the world together’. ‘Through our combined weight’, it suggested, ‘we can promote agreed rules to contain power politics’.[28]

In the early 2020s, the European Union enjoyed some successes, or believed it had. First, it performed relatively well during the pandemic, with death rates that were either comparable with or better than those achieved in other parts of the Western world. Though its vaccine approval and rollout was, embarrassingly, slightly slower than the United Kingdom's, it managed to vaccinate its population quickly enough while donating generously to the international vaccine alliance. Importantly, the economic dislocation caused by the COVID pandemic and the resulting lockdowns persuaded Germany in July 2020, under strong French pressure, to give up its opposition to EU bonds, in order to revitalise the economy on a pan-continental basis.

Second, the European Union rallied to deal with Brexit, managing to maintain unity among the twenty-seven remaining member states, no mean feat. Brussels and many member states were determined to make an example of Britain in order to dissuade others from following suit. In February 2017, Christian Kern, the Austrian chancellor, warned that any settlement 'must ensure Britain is made worse off when it leaves the trading bloc', because any other result would be a 'capitulation' for the EU. Over the next two years, the EU rammed home its advantage over a weak and divided UK government, which was hamstrung by domestic constraints, flaws in its negotiation strategy, misreadings of the EU, and reluctance to play its trump cards in the military and intelligence spheres. The European Union forced the United Kingdom to agree to a strict sequencing by which it would have to pay what it was deemed to owe to the EU and resolve the Northern Ireland border question to the satisfaction of Brussels and London. Only then would Brussels agree even to discuss the vital future economic relationship. By 2019, the EU had triumphed on all fronts, compelling the British to agree to the controversial 'backstop' that could be used to extrude Northern Ireland from the customs and single-market union with the rest of the United Kingdom.[29]

This result was achieved through a mixture of EU unity, economic threats, and other forms of pressure, either from Brussels itself or from member states. Britain was ejected from the EU's navigational satellite programme, Galileo. At the height of the COVID pandemic, the EU even briefly ordered the closure of the border between Northern Ireland and the

Republic of Ireland in order to prevent Britain from importing vaccines from the European Union. Subsequently, disagreement about Northern Ireland led to the EU suspending Britain's participation in its Horizon Europe academic research programme. Some of these hardline measures were driven more by individual member states, such as France and the Republic of Ireland, than by the European Commission or the EU as a whole. The idea that it might make geopolitical sense, in light of the Russian threat and Trump's unpredictability, to reach a better understanding with London does not seem to have occurred to many. Establishing a structured post-Brexit security and defence cooperation between the European Union and the United Kingdom became harder.

Third, the European Union mounted a concerted attempt to regulate American technology giants. Microsoft was fined for breaching the Union's anti-trust legislation. Brussels pursued Mastercard and Qualcomm. Here, Europe showed itself a potentially major actor in this space, as its data pools rivalled those of the United States and the PRC. Its aspiration towards 'digital sovereignty', to act as a data Great Power, seemed credible. This was reflected in its General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) of 2018, which forced corporations to be transparent about their use of client data. The EU also resisted the Chinese economic assault vigorously. The Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, agreed between China and the EU in December 2020, was never ratified by the European Parliament because of human rights concerns.

In other respects, Europe struggled to deal with the return of the Great Powers. To be sure, Brussels provided economic assistance to Ukraine from 2014, and funded capacity building there through the European Peace Facility. Russia was sanctioned for its invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea. At German insistence, though, the measures did not include energy, meaning that Russia's crucial revenue stream through the export of oil and gas to Europe was unaffected, and this rendered the EU largely toothless. Moreover, unlike Britain, which started training Ukrainian forces from 2015, and the Trump administration, which dispatched substantial lethal aid, including Javelin anti-tank missiles from 2018, the EU did not provide any military support to Ukraine. There were too many countries that were strongly opposed to any confrontation with Russia, among them

Germany, France, Italy, and Hungary, to permit an effective common stance on the biggest threat to the continent's security since the Second World War.

On the contrary, there was, at least initially, the hope in Brussels that relations with Moscow could be patched up. In November 2015, more than a year after the Russian leader had annexed Crimea and invaded Eastern Ukraine, European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker wrote to Putin calling for closer ties: 'which to my regret', he said, 'have not been able to develop over the past year'. He even proposed a trade agreement between the European Union and Putin's Eurasian Economic Union. Hopes for a change of behaviour in Russia soon faded, however.

Meanwhile, the EU's attempts to acquire an effective military capability languished. In 2018, the EU established 'Permanent Structured Cooperation' (PESCO) to facilitate the common defence envisaged under Article 42 of the Lisbon Treaty. This initiative eventually included all but two (Denmark and Malta) of the EU's remaining twenty-seven members. It was a much broader and more limited venture than originally envisaged. Germany blocked a more ambitious Franco-Polish plan for a vanguard team of countries with high defence spending and deployable militaries that would be capable of acting when the rest of the EU was not. If PESCO's aims were modest and mostly related to humanitarian aid and low-intensity warfare, its achievements were even more so. In 2021, the EU set up the European Defence Fund, but with a very small capitalisation, merely 1 billion euros per year. One way or the other, the EU proved incapable of mounting any serious response to the continent's biggest challenge, Russian aggression.

Europe's failure to provide for its own defence aroused the ire of the Trump administration, not only the president himself, but also of Americans more generally. In private remarks delivered in 2019, Henry Kissinger lamented that Europe had 'checked out' and failed to show 'intellectual leadership'. Europeans, he complained, had 'abdicated their role in world affairs'. If it persisted in this stance, the former US national security advisor and secretary of state warned, the continent would end up as a 'strategic appendage of Eurasia'—that is, of the Sino-Russian cartel, in effect a colony.[30]

As for containing China, that was completely out of the question. In September 2021, the EU finally published its first ‘Indo-Pacific Strategy’. This report emphasised the economic importance of the region as well as discussing ‘softer’ topics, such as sustainability, the green transition, digital connectivity, and ocean governance. It did speak of ‘enhanced naval deployments by EU member states to help protect the sea lines of communication and freedom of navigation in the Indo-Pacific’. But it denied that this was in any way directed at the PRC, the main threat in this regard, and pointedly had nothing to say about the two greatest flashpoints in the region, Taiwan and North Korea.[31]

There was some discussion during this period of a European seat on the United Nations Security Council. This was supported by Germany and many other member states, but opposed by the French, because it might replace, or at least dilute, their own privileged position. The United Nations, in any case, would allow the EU only ‘observer’ status, on the grounds that its charter allowed it only to admit national or sovereign states. The whole question highlighted the tension between the EU’s latent Great Powerness, which was the basis on which it might claim a seat on the Security Council, and that of its member state France. The message was clear: Either the EU was sovereign, or the member states were.

A half-hearted attempt to establish a separate European non-dollar international trading system never really got off the ground. In 2019, European countries—the EU and the United Kingdom—set up INSTEX (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges) to enable trade with Iran after the United States unilaterally pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear deal with Tehran. It was crippled from the start by US diplomatic pressure on European governments and companies.

Most important of all, the EU did not complete the project of political union and thereby become a Great Power. It did not take advantage of the Russian threat, the migration surge, the imminent departure of ‘Eurosceptical’ Britain, or the arrival of Trump to form a United States of Europe. The closest the EU came to what the then German finance minister, Olaf Scholz, called a ‘Hamilton-moment’ was with the creation of ‘Corona Bonds’ in the summer of 2020, but that momentum quickly dissipated. Europe had many reasons and opportunities to unite, but it chose not to

seize any of them. As the new decade dawned, the European Union was further away from being a Great Power than it had been at its start.[32]

By early 2022, as Europe emerged somewhat unsteadily from the pandemic, the geopolitical sky had darkened considerably. The struggle with London over the Northern Ireland question was still unresolved. Biden's administration was easier to deal with than Trump's, of course, but the trilateral submarine partnership between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, AUKUS, had shown what it really thought of Europe's global pretensions, because it came at the expense of Australia's existing deal with France, an EU member state. Relations with the People's Republic of China were steadily deteriorating. Above all, Russia was making ever louder threats against Ukraine in the east. The European Union, along with the United States and the United Kingdom, sought to deter any Russian attack with threats of economic sanctions.[33]

Despite this, the European Union was completely unprepared for the shock of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Putin's naked aggression posed a challenge to the self-understanding of the EU as an actor on a continent at peace: It was a direct clash between two systems, the one economic and legal, the other geopolitical, and a confrontation between the post–Great Power world and the post post–Great Power world. As Poland's former foreign minister Radek Sikorski lamented in June 2023, so long as the EU did not 'get serious about defense', it would 'remain a hybrid power: an equal to the United States and China in regulating trade, standards, and investments but a bit player when it comes to defense and security. It will remain a toothless superpower—which is to say, not a superpower at all'.[34]

To make matters worse, China was collaborating closely with Russia. It provided both moral and material assistance to Putin, which was particularly valuable to him after his initial assault became bogged down. This came on top of the PRC's escalating tensions with the United States and Taiwan in East Asia, which Brussels was keen to stay out of as much as possible. The EU now had to consider how best to balance the critical economic relationship with Beijing with Western security concerns. It did

not help that the member states were divided about this, with Germany especially reluctant to lose the connection to China.

In early October 2023, the European Union was forced to grapple with another unexpected crisis. The Hamas Islamist government of the Palestinian territory of Gaza launched a brutal attack on southern Israel, killing more than a thousand people, most of them civilians, and kidnapping several hundred, again mostly civilians. The subsequent Israeli military campaign led to the deaths of more than sixty thousand Palestinians, the majority of them civilians, and exercised publics in the Middle East, across the Global South, and in Europe itself, where the plight of Gaza became a major issue in domestic politics. Many remarked on what appeared to be the European Union's double standard over international law and civilian protection, contrasting its criticisms of Russia and leniency towards Israel. This in turn complicated Brussels's attempt to keep the world's and its own publics' focus on Moscow and Putin's aggression against Ukraine.

Meanwhile, most of the existing crises facing the EU not only rumbled on but aggravated, and were aggravated by, these new challenges. Ten years after Mario Draghi had promised to 'do whatever it takes' to defend the common currency, many Eurozone economies were still struggling. Indeed, in September 2024, Draghi published a widely discussed report lamenting Europe's economic sclerosis. The Russian full-scale attack on Ukraine only added to the continent's economic woes. According to an estimate by Santander Bank, the conflict cost the EU about $190 billion, or between 1.1 and 1.4 percent of its aggregate GDP. It also caused food and energy prices to rise, driving inflation across Europe. Economic growth was sluggish, especially when compared to China and the United States. As recently as 2015, the GDP of the United States had stood at $18 trillion, China's at $11 trillion, and the EU's (then including the United Kingdom) at $16 trillion. By 2022, the GDP of the United States had risen to $26 trillion, and China's to $17 trillion, while the EU's still stood at $16 trillion—that is, less than two-thirds that of the US GDP, a huge gulf, even allowing for the departure of the United Kingdom, inflation adjustments, and exchange rate fluctuations.[35]

The Ukraine war, which was accompanied by a massive Russian 'hybrid' assault on European societies, also deepened pre-existing fissures

around immigration and the ‘culture wars’. Moscow weaponised migration by encouraging asylum seekers to enter the EU from the east via Russia, causing Finland and Poland to impose much tighter border controls. Russian narratives about alleged Western responsibility for the Ukraine war gained traction among those on the extreme right and left and in many immigrant communities. The Israeli response to the Hamas attack also divided societies. Polarisation escalated, and populist parties of the left and right flourished. Even among more centrist voters, there was widespread unease about where sovereignty in Europe really lay.[36]

There was also an escalating economic divide with Washington. The defeat of Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election had brought some relief, but not much. The new Biden administration continued the policy of confrontation with China. It also passed the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which introduced massive subsidies for US ‘green tech’, such as electric vehicles and batteries. The measure was primarily directed against China, as part of the ‘onshoring’ of critical industries, but it also threatened many European producers. The rise in Great Power tensions was forcing the EU to completely rethink its economic model.

In responding to these challenges, the European Union scored some notable successes. Its regulatory heft, as expressed in the Digital Markets Act (2022) and Digital Services Act (2022), forced many American tech companies to comply with EU data protection and competition rules. Apple, for example, had to give up its plan to launch a proprietary iPhone connector. The loudness of the protests from the tech companies against these measures was a backhanded compliment to their effectiveness. Brussels also came up with responses to Biden’s subsidies, bringing in its own Green Deal Industrial Plan, loosening its rules on state aid, and proposing a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), which is due to take effect in 2026. It also negotiated with Washington and challenged it at the World Trade Organization in order to mitigate the IRA’s impact on European firms.[37]

Another victory was the improvement of relations with the United Kingdom, largely driven by London’s leadership in support of Ukraine. The European Political Community (EPC), an intergovernmental forum established in June 2022 in the immediate aftermath of Russia’s full-scale

invasion of Ukraine, drew the British into the wider management of the continent. The Windsor Framework of 2023 laid the dispute over Northern Ireland to rest, at least for the time being, though political instability in Northern Ireland, and the United Kingdom's shifting domestic alignments, meant the issue remained potentially volatile. The Ukraine war also accelerated the EU's push for energy diversification and green industrial policy.

Despite these achievements, during the first three years of the Ukraine war the European Union was unable to mount a Great Power response to Great Power aggression. To be sure, together with Washington, London, and other Western capitals, Brussels had imposed the most punitive sanctions (so far) on Moscow, shutting it out of the international banking system. The EU provided Ukraine with vital economic and humanitarian aid, and for the first time in the Union's history sent lethal assistance via the somewhat misnamed European Peace Facility. This was an unprecedented effort, but it did not mean that the EU was acting as a Great Power. The bulk of the military support came from outside the EU, mainly from the United States and the United Kingdom, or from individual member states, especially Germany (eventually).

The EU's Strategic Compass, a document setting out the Union's foreign policy and political vision—which appeared shortly after the invasion in March 2022—explicitly lamented the 'return to power politics'. Largely drawn up before the Russian attack on Kiev, the Compass emphasised civilian instruments and offered only five thousand men by 2025 as part of an EU Rapid Deployment Capacity. In the field of defence production the EU also failed to meet expectations. Its promises to deliver one million artillery shells to Ukraine by March 1, 2023, was only met after an eight-month delay. By the end of 2024, the EU and its member states had donated an impressive 122 billion euros to Ukraine, including 61.5 billion for economic and humanitarian assistance, 43.5 billion for military support, and 17 billion for refugees within the EU, but this was not enough to turn the tide.[38]

The European Union also struggled to mount a coherent response to the Chinese threat and the deepening cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. To be sure, in 2023 Brussels introduced measures designed to

restrict Chinese economic coercion and to screen Chinese investment, but there were serious disagreements about the extent of economic decoupling that was desirable and about the wisdom of confronting the PRC geopolitically. This was revealed in April 2023 when Emmanuel Macron and Ursula von der Leyen made a joint visit to Beijing. Referring to Taiwan, the French president warned that the EU should not get ‘caught up in crises that are not ours’, whereas the president of the European Commission stressed that the ‘threat or use of force to change the status quo is unacceptable’.[39]

Finally, the commission and member states were divided between those supporting Israel, such as Commission President von der Leyen and Hungary, and those taking a more pro-Palestinian stance, such as Josep Borrell, the high representative for foreign policy, and Spain, Ireland, and Belgium, among others. The EU’s leverage in the region was in any case very limited—it had no political or military cards to play. Despite the large sums of money it invested in the Middle Eastern peace process, and the aid it provided to Palestinian civilians, the European Union struggled to make a political impact during the Gaza war. The EU was also flummoxed by the threat posed by the Houthi rebels in Yemen to shipping passing through the Suez Canal, most of it bound for Europe—this impacted European supply chains and helped to push up inflation. The EU’s naval response, Operation Aspides, took three months to mount and involved too few ships to deal with the problem.

Worse still, it became clear that the EU’s vaunted regulatory ‘reach’ was becoming an overreach that not only antagonised the United States but inhibited European innovation. In 2024, the EU’s AI Act, hastily introduced in response to the emergence of Chat GPT, was partly shaped by strong public concern over AI ethics, bias, and disinformation. The act was roundly condemned by European start-ups as a barrier to their own development. Indeed, it was widely said of the EU’s regulatory enthusiasm that Brussels wanted to put in traffic lights before it—or anyone else—had even built the road.

As the year 2024 drew to a close, it was clear that although Brussels was acting more cohesively than ever before, Ursula von der Leyen’s effort to build up the EU’s geopolitical strategy had failed to turn it into a Great

Power capable of dealing with the twin Great Power challenges from Moscow and Beijing. The EU had no plan to end the Ukraine war. It also had no idea how to deal with the return of Donald Trump, who had won the US presidential election in November 2024. No preparations had been made for the expected shift in policy towards Europe from a man who had made his disregard for the EU—which he accused of trying to 'screw' the United States—abundantly clear.

There was thus a general sense of malaise across the continent. Emmanuel Macron summed it up in April 2024 when he said that Europe 'stands at a point where it could die of itself. We are once again in one of those moments when Europe fears its decline, is doubting itself.' This crisis of confidence was palpable across a range of issues, but nowhere was it more evident than in relation to the Russian challenge. Three decades after the end of the Cold War, many feared that the European Union would become an object in the new Great Power world.[40]

Despite the warning signs, the depth of the crisis which erupted shortly after Donald Trump's second inauguration, in January 2025, once again took Brussels by surprise. First, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth announced that Ukraine could not be expected to regain the 'borders of 2014'—in other words, Crimea. Then, Vice President JD Vance delivered a blistering speech to the Munich Security Conference suggesting that European democracy needed to prove that it was worth defending. Shortly after that, President Trump called Ukrainian President Zelensky a 'dictator' and accused Ukraine of having started the war. For good measure, he and Vance then gave the Ukrainian leader a public dressing down in the White House Oval Office. A few days later, the United States briefly paused military aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine.

The biggest shock, though, was the news that the Trump administration was speaking directly to the Russians. This was followed by a meeting between the Americans and the Russians in Saudi Arabia at which neither the Ukrainians nor the Europeans were represented. If this wasn't bad enough, Europeans were also contemplating a wider nightmare in which Washington not merely abandoned Ukraine but would seek a broader accommodation with Moscow. This might be as part of a cartel of oil-producing countries or a Russo-American agreement to carve up Ukraine's

mineral resources. Indeed, Trump was insistently demanding access to the Ukrainian minerals. These anxieties were heightened by the US president's repeated suggestion that Denmark, a NATO ally and EU member, should cede or sell Greenland to the United States, and his failure to rule out the use of force to secure that territory.

If anybody doubted the contempt in which the Trump administration held the Europeans on account of their military dependence on the United States, they were soon disabused of their illusions by a leaked 'group chat' about US air attacks on the Houthis in late March 2025. The vice president lamented that the United States was once again 'bailing out' the Europeans. Defence Secretary Hegseth replied that he agreed that the Europeans were 'PATHETIC'. One way or the other, it was clear that in this new Great Power world, the major actors did not regard either Europe or the European Union as of much account.

To make matters worse, in March and April 2025 the Trump administration imposed a slew of tariffs not only on Canadian, Mexican, and Japanese goods but also on those of the European Union. These had particularly bad consequences for the auto industry. The EU threatened retaliation, and a full-scale transatlantic trade war seemed in the offing. Brussels was in a weak position, because the EU sent 16 percent of its exports to the United States, up from 12 percent in 2012, and it was much more dependent on exports for its GDP. The European Union was also painfully conscious of its energy dependency on the United States, which had risen in recent years. It appeared that the EU and the United States were not merely two rival trading blocs, but becoming separate and competing geopolitical systems.[41]

This time, the European Union and many of its member states reacted with greater energy. In late February, Ursula von der Leyen announced that the EU Stability Pact rules, which were intended to limit member-state spending, would be relaxed for defence investments. A month later, an EU white paper on European defence was hastily released committing about 800 billion euros to enable the Union to defend itself by 2030. 'The era of the peace dividend', von der Leyen warned, 'is long gone'. 'The security architecture that we relied on', she continued, 'can no longer be taken for granted.… And that means creating an EU-wide market for defence

equipment’. But while individual member states remained free to support Kiev, the EU’s plans to supply more ammunition to Ukraine were vetoed by Hungary, and many other member states showed little urgency. Moreover, there was still no overall plan on how to turn the EU into the Great Power it needed to be. It remained the case that, as Poland’s prime minister, Donald Tusk, remarked in despair, 450 million Europeans were expecting 350 million Americans to protect them against 140 million Russians.[42]

The European Union’s qualifications to act as a Great Power or global ‘pole’ are questionable. To be sure, its resources are formidable. Even after Brexit, there were nearly 450 million people living in the European Union, more than in any other polity except India and the People’s Republic of China. Its combined economic heft still amounted to about 15 percent of global GDP by 2021, behind only that of the United States and the PRC. Economically, therefore, the EU more than fulfilled the criteria for being a major global ‘pole’. The cumulative defence expenditure of EU member states totalled 214 billion euros in 2021, which dwarfed that of Russia at $66 billion, even if purchasing power parity is taken into account.

Yet in military terms, the EU is a dwarf. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, it has only very limited instruments at its disposal. Neither the land component, the European Union Force (EUFOR), nor the naval element, the European Union Naval Force (EU NAVFOR), amount to very much. It can mobilise only about 2,500 troops through its Permanent Structured Cooperation mechanism (PESCO). Even if one aggregates the military capacity of the member states, with about 1.3 million people under arms between them, only a fraction are actually deployable. Worse, when a peacekeeping force for Ukraine was discussed in April 2025, it emerged that the states of the European Union could not even spare 25,000 men and women between them.[43]

Although the EU lacks the ability to project any kind of serious military power and has no overseas bases or territories to its name, it can boast considerable economic and regulatory reach. The European Union’s single market commands an extraordinary ordering power—normative and transformative to many but coercive to some—well beyond its own borders. While Switzerland and Norway are not members of the EU, they both are

effectively rule-takers of EU regulations which they have little say in shaping, and the same is true of Northern Ireland. States like Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which hope to join the EU and are obliged to adopt all the *acquis*—that is, the existing EU treaties, regulations, and court rulings—are in effect protectorates.

The EU also enjoys a strong reputation as a normative factor in European and global politics. It is regarded by many in civil societies across the globe as a Great Power and was a major factor in the calculations of the Great Powers themselves. But if the PRC, Russia, and the United States each take the EU seriously economically, they are less respectful geopolitically, and do not fear Brussels militarily, for reasons that should now be obvious. In fact, the European Union is more effective against its geopolitical friends, such as the United Kingdom, which it strong-armed over Brexit, and the United States, where it gave as good as it got over trade and tech regulation, than against its rivals, such as Russia and the PRC.

In soft-power terms, Europe and the European Union loom large in the world. There are limits, though. The Eurovision Song Contest, set up in 1956 in the hope of creating a shared culture among European democratic states during the Cold War, has long since become a festival of kitsch and high camp.

There is a large question mark over the resilience of the European Union. It spent fifteen years after 2008 staggering from one crisis to another. Many, including the present author, feared that it might not survive. Despite this, the EU did weather the euro and migrant crises, albeit with great difficulty; it did not disintegrate after Brexit; it survived the first Trump administration; and it has not yet been overrun by Russia. The European Union looks as if it will be around for some time yet, and it may well acquire the traditional forms of Great Power resilience in due course, if it ever becomes a Great Power.[44]

In short, the EU may have some of the characteristics of a Great Power, but it is not in fact a Great Power, and for one very simple reason. The European Union may have some of the attributes of a state, but it is not a state. It does not possess an effective army, and it does not control its own borders. It does not exercise a single will in foreign affairs: In 2003, for example, some of its member states went to war in Iraq, while others did

not. The European Union therefore does not and cannot act as a Great Power in the conventional sense.

Moreover, the EU hinders its two largest member states, France and Germany, from acting as Great Powers, and is in turn limited by them. The European Union, Germany, and to a certain extent France co-exist in a mutually constructed form of semi-sovereignty. The EU constrains Germany, which in turn restricts the EU. The French attempt to have it both ways, seeing the EU as a vehicle to limit Germany but empower France; in reality, as we have seen, the EU deprives France of key competencies in terms of currency and border control. The power that member states have surrendered has not simply been 'uploaded' to Brussels; much of it has just evaporated. In Great Power terms, Europe is less than the sum of its parts. The result is that there are not three Great Powers in mainland Europe, as some think—the EU, France, and Germany—but none at all.

The first European Security Strategy of 2003 opened with the claim that Europe had never before been so prosperous, secure, and free. Over the subsequent twenty years, though, the continent has become progressively less secure. This is primarily because the European Union has failed to develop into the Great Power it needs to be to discharge its stabilising mission. Instead, like the Germans of the Holy Roman Empire, the Europeans persist with a political system which serves not to *mobilise* power, as the Anglo-American unions had done, but to *diffuse* their immense demographic, economic, and military potential. For many, that is its chief attraction.

Over the past thirty years or so, the Europeans have never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity to change this dynamic. There have been many 'hours of Europe'. Luxembourg's foreign minister, Jacques Poos, famously proclaimed one in 1991 at the start of the Wars of the Yugoslav Succession, when the European Union hoped to come out from under the American shadow by dealing with a crisis on its own doorstep. There was another after 2008, when many expected that the economic crisis and resulting sovereign debt crisis would lead to a United States of Europe. There were four more 'European moments': in 2014 and 2022, when first the annexation of Crimea, and then the full-scale Russian invasion of

Ukraine, led to hopes that the external threat would force the continent to integrate; in 2016, over Brexit; and in 2020, during the COVID crisis. All these European moments came and went.

There were many reasons for this. European publics did not want political union. Europe lacked inspirational leadership, Founding Fathers, or a Bismarck. After a promising start, Emmanuel Macron lost his way. Angela Merkel killed any residual energy with her gradualism. Europeans also failed to grasp the lesson of the two great Anglo-American union projects: that external threats require parliamentary union that brings defence, debt, and representation together in one deliberative body. They never understood after Brexit that they would never be the equals of the British, only their superiors or inferiors. Europeans would be inferior if they failed to form a parliamentary union, and far superior, given their greater resources, if they did. Yet at every stage, Europeans refused to take the fiscal, political, and military leap necessary to secure the EU's future. There are, of course, many projects which make sense in theory but fail in practice. The European Union is unusual in that it is attempting something that history has shown will not even work in theory.

The main explanation, though, for Europe's failure to achieve political union and military independence is that it has lacked the incentive to do so. The United States guaranteed the military security of the continent through NATO, and Europeans saw no existential need to surrender their national sovereignties and embrace a supranational union. But since February 2025, this stance is manifestly no longer viable. President Donald Trump's administration has forcefully announced its unwillingness to make the traditional US investment in the security of Europe, especially if most European states fail to make a sufficient contribution to the defence of their own continent.

For the first time in thirty years, the main challenge to the European Union no longer comes from its internal fissures, enormous though these are, but from external aggression. During the euro debt crisis, the United States was sympathetic, Britain was still part of the EU, and the PRC and Russia were still relatively remote. Now Russia, China, and to a certain extent even the United States are hostile, while Britain has broken away. The EU thus risks being crushed between the clashing global poles before it manages to constitute itself as a Great Power.

Part III

THE GREAT POWERS OF TODAY

Ten

The Rise of the People's Republic of China

THE RISE, OR return, of China has been a constant theme in global geopolitics for at least a generation. Nobody now doubts that the People's Republic of China is a Great Power. It is also widely assumed that the country's phenomenal economic growth will eventually enable the People's Republic to overtake America as the world's most powerful state. Recently, the PRC was identified by the American government as the 'pacing challenge' for the United States—that is, the main power against which America compares itself. For many countries, especially in South-East Asia, China is also the principal reference point, ahead of the United States. In most other places, it is the second most important power to be reckoned with. Yet China's path to recognition as a Great Power has been a difficult one. Once the undisputed hegemon in East Asia, the country—at least according to its official narrative—underwent a 'century of humiliation', then 'stood up' under Mao's communists, before becoming integrated into the world economy. Today, there is uncertainty where China is heading, whether it is destined for preeminence or will prove to be a power whose time passed, returned, and is passing again.

As far as its late medieval subjects were concerned, the Chinese Empire was not in the world, it *was* the world. The emperor ruled 'all under heaven', a concept known as *tianxia*, a borderless space bigger than China itself. This encompassed the tribute-paying states of Thailand, Vietnam, Korea, and the Ryukyu Islands off southern Japan. The emperor's power was limited, but only by the fact that the wider world was either unknown, hardly known, or not worth knowing. The writer Qiu Jin, who worked for the emperor in the Hanlin Academy, the fifteenth-century equivalent of a

think tank, spoke of ‘a paramount boundary within Heaven and Earth: Chinese on this side, foreigners on the other. The only way to set the world in order is to respect this boundary.’[1]

Instead of trying to enlarge their understanding of the world through ‘discovery’, like Western Europeans, the Ming dynasty turned in on itself. The voyages of the legendary Admiral Zheng He, who had roamed the Indian Ocean between 1405 and 1433 and made landfall in Africa, were suspended, partly for reasons of cost and partly to focus closer to home. On land, the imperial diplomat Chen Cheng, Zheng’s contemporary, made it to Herat in present-day Afghanistan. Thereafter, China’s horizons contracted. The claim to universal empire was tacitly abandoned, but the determination to remain a world unto itself, and the claim to superiority over outsiders, remained. Foreign envoys presented to the emperor were still expected to make the traditional kowtow, an abject bow, before him.

The Manchu (Qing) dynasty, which came to power in the mid-seventeenth century, largely steered clear of major naval operations, but it did expand significantly on land, almost doubling its territory to include Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan. Some of this expansion was defensively motivated, to protect the western border of the empire from attack by nomadic tribes. In the course of crushing the Zunghar Confederacy in Mongolia, the Manchus behaved so brutally that some historians speak of genocide. The Han Chinese thus became a settler colonial people, and today they have inhabited large swathes of the present-day PRC for a shorter period of time than, say, the Protestants in Ulster. Much of the territorial expansion took place during the long reign of the eighteenth-century emperor Qianlong, whose gains rival those of the British Empire during the same period. He confidently rejected London’s trading overtures on the grounds that, as he told George III, ‘our celestial empire possesses all things in prolific abundance and lacks no product within our borders. There was therefore no need to import the manufactures of outside barbarians in exchange for our own produce.’[2]

While the Qing were by no means as ignorant of the wider world as once believed, they continued to interpret it through the traditional lens of *tianxia* and the ‘tributary system’. Mongolia, Tibet, Vietnam, Korea, and the Ryukyu Kingdom remained firmly in their orbit. Thailand, Nepal, Laos, and

the Sultanate of Sulu in the present-day Philippines were in their peripheral vision. Manchu China had more of a segmented ‘frontier policy’ than a joined-up foreign policy in the Western sense. The European states, insofar as they were registered at all, were conceived of as tributaries. There was no foreign ministry. Only the tsar was allowed to have a permanent representation; relations with Russia were dealt with via the Ministry for Minorities. Because China did not recognise any other state on a basis of equality, it had no concept of Great Powerness or a Great Power system.[3]

It would soon learn the hard way. The nineteenth-century Manchu Empire was materially and psychologically completely unprepared for the rigours of interstate competition. Its entrenched corruption, bureaucratic inertia, fragmented military organisation, and fiscal constraints made it hard for the Qing to resist outside military pressure. Karl Marx famously predicted that the country would fall apart when exposed to the light, like ‘a mummy carefully preserved in a hermetically sealed coffin’. In 1839–1842, during the First Opium War, the Chinese attempt to prevent the British from importing Indian opium into the country was roundly defeated. In the Second Opium War, from 1856 to 1860, British and French troops burned the beautiful old imperial Summer Palace in Beijing. Over the next hundred years or so, foreign powers ran riot in China, extracting trade, territorial, and jurisdictional concessions. Millions were killed during the fourteen-year Taiping Rebellion between 1850 and 1864. The ‘century of humiliation’ had begun.[4]

China did try to modernise. The establishment of its Foreign Ministry in 1860 and the subsequent establishment of a diplomatic service was a recognition that the outside world existed; the abolition of the kowtow suggested a formal retreat from assumptions of automatic superiority. The ‘self-strengthening’ movement and successive governments sought to modernise the country on Western or Japanese lines to preempt its subjugation.

It was in vain. The Sino-centric space steadily shrank. Vietnam became a French protectorate in 1885, and in that same year Burma became a British one; both were former Chinese tributary territories. In 1895, China was decisively defeated by Japan and lost Taiwan. Around the turn of the century, the country suffered the indignity of interventions by multiple

foreign powers during the ‘Boxer Uprising’. Russia effectively took over Manchuria and the Liaodong Peninsula, with its important base at Port Arthur, which it later lost to Japan. Korea, another tributary state, was annexed by Japan in 1910. Despite these losses, China had so far survived in a world of competing Great Powers not by being one itself but by being so large and difficult to administer that no single Great Power had been able to seize direct control.

The 1911 Revolution, which overthrew the Manchus and established a ‘Republic of China’, brought a surge of energy and optimism. This soon dissipated. Despite participating on the winning side during the First World War, China found itself sidelined at Versailles. Throughout the 1920s, the country was wracked by warlordism and civil war between the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the ruling Kuomintang (KMT) of Chiang Kai-shek. Hyperinflation, famine, and rural poverty, especially during the late Republican period, undermined the legitimacy of the KMT and fuelled support for the Communists.

In 1931, the Japanese occupied Manchuria, and six years later they launched a full-scale invasion of the country; by then Mao Zedong had taken over the leadership of the CCP. The country suffered terrible human and material damage, epitomized by the infamous ‘Rape of Nanjing’ in 1937, as the KMT regime, with Western help, battled Japan, tying down over a million Japanese troops. Chiang’s enormous contribution to the Allied cause, far greater than that of the Free French, prompted President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s determination to grant China a permanent seat on the new United Nations Security Council. This was a recognition of the country’s past and future Great Power role. Chiang and Mao emerged victorious against the Japanese in 1945. But within four years Communist forces had routed Chiang’s Nationalists, forcing him and his Kuomintang followers to retreat to the island of Taiwan.[5]

When Mao hailed the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, he famously proclaimed that ‘China has stood up’. The CCP drew legitimacy from its victory over the foreign oppressors, even though Chiang’s KMT had done most of the actual fighting against the Japanese. If Japan had been vanquished, and the British were just hanging on to Hong Kong, the United States—whose Seventh Fleet kept the PRC out of the

Taiwan Straits—was now the main enemy. Washington recognised Chiang's regime as the legitimate government of China and let him retain control of the country's seat on the United Nations Security Council. In late 1950, Mao went to war in Korea against the US and UN forces there. His ability to fight Washington and its allies to a standstill in Korea vindicated the PRC's claim to be treated as a Great Power, despite its exclusion from the postwar settlement. Subsequently, Mao supported the Communists in Vietnam against first the French and then the Americans, activities which were part of showing that China was 'standing up' as promised. Along the way, he broke with the Soviet Union, partly because of his frustration with Soviet tutelage, and partly on account of its repudiation of Joseph Stalin after the latter's death in 1953. The PRC now claimed to lead the global communist movement.[6]

Mao's temporal framework was a blend of Marxist ideology and Chinese civilisation. The imperialists, he claimed, were 'like the sun at five o'clock in the afternoon while we are like the sun at six o'clock in the morning'. 'The east wind', Mao continued, 'is bound to prevail over the west wind because we are powerful and strong.' Despite this rhetoric, the PRC was soon compelled to tread carefully over Taiwan. Mao spent a long time planning an invasion of the island in 1950 but concluded that it was not feasible. On two occasions, in 1954–1955 and 1958, he came close to nuclear war with the United States over the offshore islands. Thereafter, the two sides settled down to a highly ritualised, even performative, cross-strait antagonism, according to which they even agreed to shell each other on alternate days.[7]

At home, China experienced a new period of isolation and turmoil. The 'Great Leap Forward' of the 1950s, a crash programme to create an industrial economy which would power domestic revolutionary transformation and enable the PRC to deter the capitalist powers, led to a famine which killed millions. In the 1960s, the 'Cultural Revolution' tore families apart and severely weakened the CCP's bureaucratic capacity and military professionalism. The resulting trauma, which came on top of that suffered during the Second World War, endures to this day. The Sino-Soviet split meant that China was now cut off not only from the Western but also

the Soviet economic system. Economically, China was severed from the world more comprehensively than at any point since the Middle Ages.[8]

Internationally, though, the PRC regarded itself, as its first foreign minister, Zhou Enlai, put it in 1956, as ‘a great power’. It was a recognised actor in the world. At the Bandung Conference of 1955, the PRC positioned itself as the leader of the ‘Third World’, a position for which India was its main rival. In the 1960s, many post-colonial states indeed looked to China as a model. Maoism was a ‘brand’ among Western European youth in the 1960s and 1970s. Mao himself was courted by Eastern European communists seeking to hedge against Moscow. Despite this, Chinese communism was generally less universalist than its Soviet counterpart and was primarily a vehicle for achieving national goals.[9]

The People’s Liberation Army (PLA), seen as a formidable military force, thrashed India in a short border war in 1962. In 1964, the PRC detonated its first atomic bomb. In 1969, the PRC and the Soviet Union fought a brief border war along the Ussuri River. Two years later, thanks to the initially secret warmer relations with the United States, Mao took over China’s seat on the United Nations Security Council previously held by Taiwan. Shortly after, US President Nixon ‘went to China’ and the two powers effectively agreed to contain the USSR. The PRC was now formally one of the five great world powers.

Although Mao’s China was economically underdeveloped and technologically far behind the other four permanent Security Council members, this does not mean that its power was not recognised. Nixon’s much-heralded trip was evidence of the importance the United States attached to Beijing. In addition, the PRC, despite its poverty, enjoyed some global reach, supporting a number of revolutionary organisations across the world. In Rhodesia, for example, it opposed the Soviet-supported Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) guerillas and backed the breakaway Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) faction, whose leader, Robert Mugabe, eventually became president of Zimbabwe. The PRC’s global role throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and early 1970s—long before the country opened up economically to the West—is a prime example of how a country may act, and be treated as, a Great Power even if it is economically weak.

In 1974, Mao expounded his ‘three worlds’ theory, which grouped the Soviet Union and the United States together, then Western Europe and Japan, with the PRC leading the rest of the globe. Strikingly, he envisaged the capitalist EEC as a separate pole in the world. But after Mao’s death in 1976, and some domestic turmoil, his successors took China in the direction of the United States. In 1979, the two countries finally recognised each other officially; the United States relegated the status and defence of Taiwan to the Taiwan Relations Act, by which the United States undertook to help the island defend itself. That same year, the PRC conducted a major border incursion against Vietnam to ‘punish’ that country for deposing China’s ally Pol Pot in Cambodia and for its loyalty to the Soviet Union more generally. Beijing also began to retreat from its foreign policy adventurism, scaling back its support for regimes like Angola’s.

At the same time, party leader Deng Xiaoping started to open the country to the West economically. In 1978, he began incremental pro-market reforms for town and village enterprises. A year later, the ‘one-child policy’ was introduced in order to reduce poverty. In 1980, the PRC assumed China’s seat at the International Monetary Fund and set up the first special economic zones designed to attract foreign investment and to stimulate domestic private enterprise in Guangdong, Fujian, and Hainan. These measures were facilitated by the warming of ties with Washington, which brought technology transfer, trade agreements, and access to Western markets. By 1985, outside investment in the Chinese economy, formerly almost zero, hit nearly $10 billion per year. International trade between the PRC and the rest of the world began to increase.

Economic reform ran in tandem with a deepening relationship with the United States based on a common antagonism to the Soviet Union. In 1980, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the PRC set up a jointly run surveillance facility at Korla in the west of the country that was designed to eavesdrop on the Russians. During the decade, America supplied the PRC with artillery, naval ship designs, helicopters, advanced avionics, and much else. US businesses were encouraged to invest in the country. The PRC also underwent an astonishing political liberalisation in the late 1980s, which might well have put the country on a different political trajectory had its

leading advocate, the former general secretary of the CCP, Hu Yaobang, not died suddenly of a heart attack.[10]

Then, between the autumn of 1989 and late 1991, the Chinese Communist Party leadership experienced a quadruple shock. First, a short-lived democratisation movement was crushed on Tiananmen Square, leading to global outrage and the imposition of Western economic sanctions, including a European Communities (soon EU) arms embargo. Then, the Soviet Empire in Europe collapsed. To make matters worse, an American-led coalition ejected Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in a lightning victory. As if all this were not bad enough, the Soviet Union itself disintegrated. Wherever one looked, Western democracy and Western power seemed rampant. President George Bush Senior's proposed 'New World Order' in 1991 struck fear into the hearts of the CCP leadership. The international environment, which had been stable and even benign for at least a decade, suddenly looked very hostile to the PRC.[11]

The rest of the 1990s provided little reassurance. Taiwan democratised —demonstrating that democracy and Confucianism were not incompatible —and underwent its own economic renaissance, becoming the world's leading producer of microchips. Though the pre-Tiananmen level of trade resumed after a decent interval, Western, especially American, engagement with China was based on the assumption that economic links would lead to political opening. That was precisely what the CCP feared. In 1993, to the horror of the PRC, US President Bill Clinton compared the regional forum APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) to NATO. Moreover, the West intervened repeatedly in conflicts across the globe—in Bosnia, Haiti, Kosovo (during which a NATO stealth bomber hit the PRC embassy in Belgrade), Iraq, and Sierra Leone.[12]

After nearly twenty years of concentrating on the Soviet Union, the PRC changed focus. As the new Chinese leader, Jiang Zemin, stated in 1993, 'From now on and for a relatively long period of time, the United States will be our main diplomatic adversary.' It didn't matter, he elaborated five years later, whether Washington adopted a 'containment' or an 'engagement' policy, because both had the same 'central aim', which was 'to change our country's socialist system and finally bring our country into the western capitalist system'. Not only was the United States trying to

create a ‘unipolar world’ and dominate everything, Jiang warned, but it would ‘for a long time… maintain significant advantages in politics, economics, science and technology and military affairs’. Against this background, China’s economic opening was both essential, in order to strengthen the country against the West, and risky, because it provided an entry point for Western influence and might whet domestic appetites for political participation.[13]

Throughout the 1990s, the PRC sought to parry the Western threat. On the one hand, it was anxious to avoid provocation until the economic reforms had borne fruit. After Tiananmen, Deng’s injunction was that the country should ‘observe calmly, secure our position, cope with affairs, calmly hide our capabilities and bide our time, maintain a low profile, never claim leadership, and accomplish something’. The PRC managed to hang on to the vital ‘Most Favoured Nation’ status with the United States despite congressional attempts to punish it for Tiananmen Square. Jiang Zemin became a public enthusiast for ‘globalisation’. Economic growth gathered pace, and the country began to build up formidable foreign currency balances in order to have, as premier Zhu Rongji put it, a ‘“political reserve”, the symbol of a country’s economic strength’. In July 1997, Hong Kong was reincorporated after the British withdrawal on the basis of ‘One Country, Two Systems’. Very shortly after that, China showcased its willingness to act responsibly within the international system by refusing to devalue the yuan competitively during the great Asian financial crisis. In 1999, when NATO accidentally bombed the PRC embassy in Belgrade, Beijing protested vigorously but otherwise did not respond.[14]

On the other hand, the PRC was determined not to show weakness. It clashed with the United States over Taiwan in 1996, leading to the dispatch of an American carrier battle group to the vicinity of the strait. After two decades of preparing for land warfare against Vietnam and the Soviet Union, the PLA was re-oriented towards air and naval combat with the United States. The ‘Golden Shield Project’, launched in 1998, sought to regulate the Chinese people’s access to Western ideas via the internet. Beijing also sought a closer relationship with Moscow to balance Washington, setting up the Shanghai Five in 1996 with Russia and three former Soviet Central Asian Republics. Four years later, this forum was

upgraded to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); its main purpose, as State Councillor Bai Bingguo said, was to ‘help change the power imbalance’ with the West. In mid-July 2001 these efforts culminated in the Sino-Russian Good Neighbourly Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, in which both parties agreed to oppose Western ‘interference’ and to ‘maintain global strategic balance and stability’.[15]

The September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States and their aftermath created a worrying new reality for the CCP leadership. The Americans now appeared to them to be stronger and more interventionist than ever. The United States invaded and occupied Afghanistan, which borders China, and—much more controversially—did the same in Iraq. American troops also established bases in Central Asia in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The latter move, which took place (shockingly from the PRC point of view) with Russian connivance, threatened to ‘encircle’ China. Not only were the Americans facing off against them to the east, north-east, and south, but they had now appeared to the west as well.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, in December 2001, the PRC joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). The Clinton and George W. Bush administrations expected this move not only to turbo-charge globalisation to everyone’s benefit, but also to facilitate the democratisation of China. In economic terms, the effects were dramatic. Within a decade, the PRC had become first the fifth largest (2005), then the third largest (2007), and finally the second largest (2010) economy in the world. All of this came with huge environmental costs, of course, as the country was scoured for natural resources and scourged by pollution.[16]

Contrary to widespread Western, and some Chinese, expectations, there was no matching democratic change, though there was certainly greater openness. This failure to adopt Western political norms meant that while China’s new strength was recognised, as was its legal parity, the PRC was not accepted as a *social* equal by the Western powers. What China’s remarkable economic growth did do, though, was strengthen the domestic legitimacy of the regime, which took the credit for accession to the WTO. The trauma of Tiananmen Square receded somewhat. Moreover, WTO entry accelerated global supply-chain integration centred on China, increasing its

leverage over multinational corporations and reshaping global trade patterns.[17]

The unprecedented ascent of China did not, at first, provoke a balancing reaction either in the West or in Asia. This was partly because the new leader, Hu Jintao, initially continued the attentist ‘hide and bide’ policy of waiting until the time was right for the PRC to become more assertive, and his premier, Wen Jiabao, insisted that in the new globalised world, China’s ‘peaceful rise’ threatened no one. They were pushing an open door. Robert Zoellick, US deputy secretary of state, famously remarked in 2005 that he hoped the PRC would become a ‘responsible stakeholder’ in global governance. There was little sign of unease in parts of South-East Asia, Australasia, or South Korea. Japan grumbled a bit, and Taiwan grumbled quite a lot. The 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing became a kind of ‘coming-out’ party for China as it showcased its history, culture, and achievements of the past two decades.[18]

Shortly after the Olympics ended, the Western world was convulsed by the global financial crisis. The crisis seriously damaged not only their economies but also their standing in Chinese eyes. There had been, as Chairman Hu put it, ‘a major change in the balance of international forces’, which improved the chances for ‘multipolarity’. As the United States and Europe struggled with the political fallout, the PRC became more assertive. Time seemed to be speeding up. Objectives that had once appeared remote now looked attainable in the near future. Hu Jintao spoke less of ‘hiding and biding’ and more of a great project of ‘national rejuvenation’. The Western expectation that rising prosperity would inevitably bring China into its camp gave way to the Chinese sense that it had no more to learn from the West and that its own triumph was inevitable.[19]

This history is essential for understanding China’s role in the world today. It takes from the past not only a sense of empire, authority, cultural superiority, and Sino-centricity, but also the trauma of Western and Japanese imperialism and subjugation. This explains China’s complicated relationship with the concept of Great Powerness, which combines an insistence on the recognition of Chinese greatness with a profound unease with the whole idea of ‘hegemonialism’. According to the official narrative,

the story of China is one of past glory followed by humiliation, present opportunity, and future glory. The PRC is not so much the ‘rising power’ of Western parlance as a returning one.[20]

The omnipresence of history in official discourse begins with the revival of the concept of *tianxia*—‘all under heaven’—which General Secretary Xi Jinping terms ‘an important part’ of the ‘Chinese national spirit’. It is most evident, though, in the constant recalling of the indignities China suffered at the hands of the West in the past, from the Opium Wars to the conflict with Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalists in 1949. Paradoxically, resentment at the ‘century of humiliation’ is felt more strongly now, at the height of China’s power and prosperity, than under Mao. Under Mao, China had ‘stood up’. He no longer needed the prop of history and dispensed with any claims of reparations from the Japanese. But after Tiananmen, embattled at home and fearful of Western power after the collapse of Soviet communism, the regime put out the slogan ‘Never forget National humiliation’ as part of its ‘Patriotic Education Programme’.[21]

Over the past thirty years, the PRC has therefore cast itself as both a Great Power and a leader of the Global South against the injustices of traditional Great Power politics, of which China had been the greatest victim. On the one hand, Deng stated clearly that ‘in the so-called multipolar world, China too will be a pole’. On the other hand, Xi claimed that the PRC was the ‘largest developing country’, a concept which he used in the political and cultural rather than the economic sense, though of course refusing to identify as a developed country helped China to maintain its very high level of carbon emissions without violating international climate regimes. China wants to hunt with the Great Power hounds and run with the ‘developing’ hares.[22]

Initially, the PRC’s self-understanding as a Great Power was driven by the need to restore multipolarity after the American triumph over the Soviet Union. Beijing responded to the spectre of a ‘New World Order’ with the claim that the system might contain ‘one superpower’, the United States, but ‘many great powers’ with China as one of them. In the same spirit, the PRC and Russia issued a ‘Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order’ in 1997. Towards the end of his tenure, Jiang Zemin spoke of China pursuing ‘great power diplomacy’.

The main target of this and similar initiatives was American-led 'hegemonism' and 'neo-interventionism'.[23]

If China saw itself as a Great Power, it was as a Great Power with a difference. Initially, the PRC made sparing use of its veto power at the United Nations Security Council. After the 2008 financial crisis, it was reluctant to engage with American suggestions that the two powers should form a 'G2' partnership for the management of the world. The PRC regarded this as premature, and in any case it did not want simply to be admitted to an existing system. This was partly because it had no desire to shoulder the responsibility, but primarily because Beijing wanted a completely different type of world order—that is, a multipolar system free of Western dominance, whose members retained absolute state sovereignty, and whose economic governance skewed towards state-development models. 'The argument that a big power is bound to seek hegemony', Premier Wen Jiabao stated in February 2009, 'does not apply to China.' 'Seeking hegemony', he continued, 'goes against China's cultural tradition as well as the will of the Chinese people.' 'China's development', Wen averred, 'harms no one and threatens no one.'[24]

Even then, though, there were signs that the PRC was beginning to think of itself as playing a more traditional Great Power role. In 2003–2006, the CCP leadership convened a course of lectures and discussions on the subject of the rise and fall of the Great Powers throughout history. Afterwards, these sessions were bulked out through interviews with international statesmen, including the Singaporean premier, Lee Kuan Yew, and noted Western historians, such as Paul Kennedy; these were turned into a lengthy Chinese TV series which aired in November 2006. This programme was viewed by hundreds of thousands of Chinese citizens, and to the surprise of many, it eschewed communist ideology altogether, concentrating instead on the reasons why powers have risen or fallen over time. Strikingly, the study focused on Western examples, such as the Dutch and British Empires, rather than Eastern ones, such as the empire of the Moghuls, as models to be emulated. It was, after all, Western recognition of Great Power status that was most prized. Studying the West was also a way to understand, match, and eventually overcome China's most dangerous rivals.[25]

A shift to an assertive view of the PRC's role in Great Power politics took place in the following decade. 'China is a big country,' China's foreign minister, Yang Jiechi, told his Singaporean counterpart during an Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) forum in 2010, 'and other countries are small countries and that is just a fact.' This kind of rhetoric escalated under the leadership of Xi Jinping, who succeeded Hu Jintao as party chairman in 2012. His accession marked a step change in China's articulation of its global role. In 2013, Foreign Minister Wang Yi set out the new stance in a programmatic speech in Washington entitled 'Toward a New Model of Major Country Relations Between China and the United States'. He denied any intention 'to challenge or even replace' the United States, and he did not seek 'the so-called "G2"' either. Instead, the foreign minister called for 'respecting each other's system' in a 'world of rich diversity'. A few months later, he promised that China would undertake a 'more proactive diplomacy'.[26]

In practice, this meant that 'major countries' should accept each other's dominance in their respective regions. Wang Yi in 2014 said, with respect to the South China Sea, 'We will never accept unreasonable demands from little countries.' This more and more assertive international posture was reflected in the increased use of the national veto at the United Nations Security Council throughout the decade. It also found expression in popular and scholarly discourse. Traditional adult male bloggers were joined online by the 'Fan Girls', their young patriotic women counterparts, and the teenage, mostly female 'Little Pinks' in calling out slights against the PRC. If Chinese academics were talking animatedly about the former senior State Department official Joseph Nye and his 'soft-power' ideas throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, by the end of its second decade what they were primarily interested in was John Mearsheimer and the *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.[27]

For Xi, though, China's Great Powerness was also a moral project which should have, in his words, 'Chinese characteristics, Chinese style and [a] Chinese manner'. The PRC would pursue not just its interests but justice, both for China itself—by supporting his 'China Dream' and 'Great Rejuvenation' plan—and for the world more broadly. Xi claimed that he would maintain, and even expand, economic globalisation, but distribute its

gains more fairly in a ‘democratised’ world, that is, one in which the dominance of the United States had been curbed. His vision of *tianxia* was one in which China—or he himself, the two being increasingly indistinguishable in his rhetoric—was responsible for ‘all under heaven’.[28]

In the middle of the decade, time seemed to accelerate again. Britain voted to leave the European Union in 2016, and shortly thereafter Donald Trump won the presidential election in the United States. Whatever their actual causes and consequences, both events were widely seen in Beijing as evidence of Western decline. Many in Europe and the rest of the world agreed with that assessment. Meanwhile, the economic growth of the PRC continued unabated, so that towards the end of the decade it had achieved or surpassed purchasing power parity with the United States. Xi told the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 that thanks to the CCP, China was now in ‘a leading position’ in many areas and had ‘crossed the threshold into a new era’. To many in Beijing and around the world, China was now not merely unquestionably a Great Power, but on the verge of becoming the *greatest* power in the world.

China’s preoccupations can be divided into global, regional, and internal, though the dividing lines between these spheres are fluid. At the global level, the PRC wants to maintain access to world markets in order to foster economic growth or at least avoid or soften any downturn. It also wishes to mitigate the effects of climate change, which threaten much of its eastern littoral, while fending off demands for a reduction of its emissions, which are the highest in the world—larger than those of the United States, Europe, and Japan combined. All this is necessary to achieve the developmental aims of the CCP, whose constitution stipulates bringing ‘per capita GDP up to the level of moderately developed countries’ by the centenary of the PRC in 2049.[29]

The PRC sees Western domination of the international system as the biggest threat to these ambitions and to its Great Power position generally. America and its allies largely run the key financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The United States controls the dollar, the currency in which the PRC keeps most of its huge foreign exchange reserves. Jin Canrong, one of the country’s leading

international relations scholars, warned that far from providing leverage over America, these holdings were ‘a hidden vulnerability’ which left the PRC at the mercy of Washington. The United States also still has a vice grip on technology. In the mid-2020s, the Chinese still depend heavily on what they call the ‘Eight Guardian Warriors’ of Cisco, IBM, Google, Qualcomm, Intel, Apple, Oracle, and Microsoft. Above all, the Western promotion of democracy and human rights is deeply inimical to the CCP.[30]

China seeks to meet these global challenges not by supplanting the United States or aspiring to dominate the world itself. This would exceed its capabilities and in some ways violate its principles. Instead, the PRC wants to ‘democratise’ the international order. This involves resisting American-led ‘unipolarity’ and replacing it with a system of multiple ‘poles’ of which China would be one. The resulting ‘balance’ would keep Western ‘hegemonism’ in check. Ideologically, the PRC does not try to export ‘communism with Chinese characteristics’, but it does promote illiberalism worldwide—for example, by supporting repressive regimes in Africa by providing training and technology. This, Beijing hopes, will make the world safer for the CCP’s dictatorship.

The achievement and maintenance of multipolarity was conceived as both a precondition and a consequence of the realisation of what Xi called the ‘China Dream’. A self-conscious echo of the famous twentieth century ‘American Dream’ of prosperity, Xi’s vision was only partly economic. The Great Rejuvenation he envisaged had more to do with making the PRC a Great Power, which the president saw as the precondition for the happiness and welfare of its citizens. In late November 2012, shortly after his accession, Xi stated that ‘fulfilling the Chinese People’s great renewal is the Chinese people’s greatest dream’. A few days later he added that ‘this dream can be said to be the dream of a strong nation. And for the military, it is the dream of a strong military.’ History was absolutely central to this vision, as the ‘China Dream’—unlike the forward-looking ‘American Dream’, but similar perhaps to ‘Make America Great Again’—is conceived of as a revival of past glories.[31]

The United States is also seen as the greatest threat to the PRC regionally. It is the ill-defined American commitment to Taipei which stands between China and the achievement of its main territorial demand,

reunification with Taiwan. Worse, the United States polices the whole ‘first island chain’ of its allies, which runs from Japan through the Ryukyu Islands, Taiwan, and the Philippines to Borneo, and thus potentially cuts China off from access to the Pacific and Indian Oceans. Chinese strategists refer to this ring of US bases to their east, such as Okinawa, Guam, and Marianas, as ‘ropes’ which tie them down, and barriers which ‘seal’ or ‘lock’ them in.[32]

The resulting danger to the PRC’s security and prosperity in the age of globalisation was summed up by Hu Jintao’s reference in November 2003 to the ‘Straits of Malacca Dilemma’. In a highly unusual speech about a specific geopolitical threat, he pointed out that China’s economy depended on a waterway—the Strait of Malacca connecting the South China Sea with the Indian Ocean and the rest of the world—it didn’t control. The issue here is not so much energy and food security as international trade, the basis for the PRC’s current prosperity. Because of its extensive coal deposits, strategic grain reserve, vibrant renewable sector, and land border with oil- and grain-rich Russia and Central Asia, China probably cannot be frozen or starved out, but if it were to become ‘unplugged’ by a blockade from global markets, the country’s economy would face severe difficulties.[33]

It is against this background that Xi announced what amounted to a Chinese Monroe Doctrine. If only a few years earlier Wang Yi had denied any plan to ‘push the US out of the region’, Xi stated in June 2017 that ‘it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia’. The subtext of this demand was not only that it was up to the PRC to lead the region, but also that dominating Asia was critical to the country’s security and global position.[34]

Important though these external worries are, the greatest concern of the CCP leadership is regime survival. The main threat is believed to come from within. Beijing is much exercised by the democracy movement in Hong Kong, ‘separatists’ in Tibet, and ‘Islamist terrorists’ in Xinjiang. The CCP is also anxious about dissident groups with a much broader presence across the country, such as the religious movement Falun Gong and the Christian churches.

The external and the internal are linked, of course, by the support that foreign actors like the United States give, or are alleged to give, to the

regime's domestic critics. This was made clear in what has become known as 'Document No. 9', which was drawn up in April 2013, not long after Xi came to power. It railed against 'false ideological trends', top of the list being 'Promoting Western Constitutional Democracy', which was seen as 'an attempt to undermine the current leadership and socialism with Chinese characteristics system of governance'. Next in the demonology was 'espousing "universal values"' by claiming that 'the West's value system defies time and space, transcends nation and class, and applies to all humanity'. This was followed by an attack on 'neoliberalism', which the United States was supposedly trying to smuggle into China under the guise of globalisation in order to undermine its state-owned enterprises.[35]

'Document No. 9' then went on to condemn the 'freedom of the press' as an attack on the party leadership, and the promotion of 'historical nihilism' as an attempt to 'undermine the history of the CCP and of New China'. This was followed by a critique of those arguing that 'reform of the political system lags behind and obstructs reform of the economy'. 'These mistaken views', the document claimed, 'exist in great numbers in overseas media and reactionary publications.' 'They penetrate China', it continued, 'through the Internet and underground channels.' In this, 'Western anti-China forces and internal "dissidents"' were allegedly 'working together'. In Tibet and Xinjiang, they were 'using the ethnic and religious issues to divide and break up' China. The big danger to the Chinese Dream and the Great Rejuvenation was thus the prospect of 'color revolutions', a term which referred to anti-government—and Western-backed—movements in Ukraine, Georgia, and elsewhere.

The PRC reacted to these challenges and opportunities by playing an increasingly Great Power role both globally and locally. In a series of private meetings and secret speeches after he came to power, Xi told the political and military leadership to press ahead but to prepare for trouble from the Americans. Following the president's lead, PRC diplomats—dubbed 'Wolf Warriors' after the highest-grossing action film of all time in China of the same name—became more aggressive as the 2010s wore on. In 2011, a British diplomat got off relatively lightly when he was informed by a Chinese colleague that 'what you have to remember is that you come from

a weak and declining nation'. By November 2019, the PRC ambassador to Stockholm was responding to some bilateral tension with threats. 'For our friends,' he told Swedish live radio, 'we have fine wine, but for our foes we have shotguns,' words taken from the theme song of a famous PRC film on the Korean War.[36]

In international organisations, Beijing trod more carefully, but the same basic pattern was visible. On the one hand, the PRC accepted Western international norms with respect to the UN climate regime and even the UN's Western-inspired Responsibility to Protect doctrine, which obliges states to act against genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. On the other hand, there was ample evidence that China was more inclined to subvert international institutions than to be socialised by them. For example, it used its position in the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) to harass opponents of the regime beyond its own borders. It also ignored adverse rulings on the South China Sea issued by an independent arbitral tribunal established under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).[37]

A similar theme was visible in the PRC's response to the COVID pandemic. On the one hand, it pursued a vigorous 'vaccine diplomacy' which made up for the failure of the Western states to share enough of their vaccines with the rest of the world. In early 2021 the PRC sent millions of free 'shots' to sixty-nine poor countries. It even spoke of a new 'Health Silk Road' along which vaccines would travel. On the other hand, Beijing suppressed information about the origins and spread of the virus, most likely from a laboratory in Wuhan, and during the early stages of the pandemic threatened retaliation against states that banned flights from China. China also bullied vaccine producers into disavowing Taiwan, forcing vaccine recipients to give up their recognition of that country, and often bundled the provision of vaccines with infrastructure contracts and trade concessions to China, turning pandemic aid into long-term strategic leverage.[38]

Some elements in the PRC openly sought to exploit economic connections. In 2018, a study by China's National Defense University called for the 'deep development of military-civil fusion'. The study vowed to 'exploit every linkage and every project', especially through the 'Belt

and Road' programme. This would serve partly to 'steadily build an interlocking network of backbone military bases' to 'cover China's main resource supply areas and strategic passageways'. But the ambition was broader than that. 'We must gain a grip on foreign government leaders and their business elites', the authors of the study continued, 'by encouraging our companies to invest in their local economies.' How this worked in practice was demonstrated a year later when the PRC imposed economic sanctions on obstreperous Australia but signed an improved Free Trade Agreement with its more cooperative neighbour New Zealand.[39]

Many of the PRC's activities, however, were essentially defensive, designed to carve out a space independent of US power. In October 2014, China agreed with India to set up the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). This was headquartered in Beijing and launched in 2016, involving fifty-seven Asian and Western states, including France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Significantly, the United States and Japan did not participate. The then US treasury secretary, Larry Summers, remarked that the establishment of the AIIB was 'the moment the United States lost its role as the underwriter of the global economic system'. Others see the AIIB as a supplement to, rather than replacement for, US-led institutions, arguing that the World Bank and the US- and Japanese-dominated Asian Development Bank are still leaders in this field.[40]

The PRC was less successful in presenting the renminbi as an alternative global currency, though it is held as reserve by many countries; the main problems were its lack of full convertibility and China's increasingly stringent capital controls. In 2015, China set up the Cross-border Interbank Payment System (CIPS) to reduce the country's dependence on the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT), which allows for the secure exchange of information between financial institutions. That same year, the PRC also launched its 'Made in China 2025' campaign, intended not only to promote autarchy but to set international manufacturing standards. Beijing continued to fret over US dominance of chip design and production. Despite severe American limitations on technology transfer, in 2023 Huawei was able to offer a new smartphone with chips that had been entirely designed and built in the PRC. Meanwhile, at the International Telecommunications Union, Beijing

continues to push its own technical standards in areas such as 5G, AI ethics, and surveillance technology to ensure that its regulatory reach extends beyond just Chinese products.

Reducing dependency on the outside world for foodstuffs was much harder. The chairman of the China Investment Corporation (CIC), Ding Xuetong, announced in June 2014 that ‘food security’ was ‘an urgent challenge’ for the country. The PRC’s investment organisations were tasked with sourcing products and connecting with the agricultural sector globally. Taking the long view, China poured money not only into arable land, but also into land improvement and irrigation projects.[41]

The vulnerability of the PRC’s energy supply was partly mitigated by a massive investment in renewables such as electric vehicles and solar panels, but the country remained dependent on fossil fuels primarily imported from the Persian Gulf. This, next to the desire to outflank the United States, was the main driver of Beijing’s increased diplomatic engagement in the Middle East. After 2011, the PRC appointed a special envoy for Syria, drew up its own peace plan for that country, and vetoed UN resolutions against Bashar al-Assad. Beijing’s interest in reducing tensions in the Middle East was stimulated by an Iranian drone and missile strike on Saudi Arabia in 2019, which temporarily knocked out half of the kingdom’s oil production. In early March 2023, the PRC was credited with the resumption of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. A year later, it brought the two squabbling Palestinian factions, Hamas and Fatah, together, at least briefly. China’s main interest in the region was to counter US hegemony and safeguard the Belt and Road project.[42]

At the start of the 2010s, the PRC was hopeful of triangulating globally between the United States and the European Union. In April 2014, Xi called on his ‘European friends’ to build ‘a bridge of friendship and cooperation across the Eurasian continent’. Noting that ‘China has always supported European integration’, he claimed that the PRC and the EU collectively made up one-tenth of the world’s surface area, had a fourth of its population, and filled three seats on the UN Security Council (a majority of the permanent members). Moreover, Xi continued, China and the EU were ‘the two most important economies in the world, accounting for one third of the global economy’. Believing that differing values between China and

Europe should not be a barrier, he went on to suggest that ‘we need to respect each other’s paths of reform’. Though the United States was nowhere mentioned, the PRC leader’s hope that Brussels and Beijing might combine to balance Washington was clear to see.[43]

Xi had grounds for optimism. Over the previous decade, the EU had become the PRC’s greatest trading partner in dollar terms, and the PRC was in turn the second greatest partner of the EU. There was talk of lifting the post-Tiananmen arms embargo, and even of collaboration in the fields of space and satellite technology. Both Brussels and Beijing had deep reservations about the United States, especially after the election of Donald Trump in 2016. At this point, the PRC wanted a strong EU, partly for economic reasons but mainly in order to hedge against Washington. In 2010, at the height of the European sovereign debt crisis, the PRC bought a lot of Southern European government bonds. In the view of the legendary international financier George Soros, this action saved the euro. Beijing also long supported the accession of states like Serbia to the EU, over Moscow’s objections, in order to improve global prosperity and connectivity, thus benefitting the PRC economy.[44]

At the same time, the PRC deepened its relationship with Russia, again with the object of balancing not only the United States but also Japan. In 2017, the two countries conducted joint naval exercises in the Baltic Sea; these were periodically repeated in later years in a calculated show of force against NATO. It was in the Arctic, though, where the collaboration was most intense, as both powers sought to take advantage of the melting ice to secure access to natural resources and open new sea-lanes. The Northern Sea Route (NSR) connecting the PRC with Russia along its northern coast was first traversed by Chinese ships, with the help of an ice-breaker, in August 2017.[45]

The NSR not only opened up the possibility of a cheaper entry point for Chinese exports into Europe—via a route that was considerably shorter than the traditional one across the Indian Ocean—but also had profound strategic implications. For the first time, the United States did not sit astride a main Chinese trade artery. In the following year, 2018, Beijing announced the ‘Polar Silk Road’, conceived both as an economic highway and a route out of encirclement. *The Science of Military Strategy*, a textbook published by

the Chinese National Defense University (NDU) in 2020, even stated that the Arctic region 'represents the main direction in which our national interests are expanding', and that the region is bound to provide new missions for the Chinese armed forces as well. The official State Oceanic Administration went so far as to say that China is a 'near-Arctic state' which intends to be a 'polar great power' by 2035.[46]

The desire to escape the West's vice-grip on the world's waterways also partly inspired the PRC's greatest economic and strategic initiative of the decade, launched in September 2013 and initially christened 'One Belt, One Road' and then simply 'Belt and Road'. Though the programme envisaged a 'Maritime Silk Road' through the Indian Ocean, its main thrust was a 'New Silk Road' on *terra firma*, by road and rail, connecting China to its export markets in Europe without exposure to naval interdiction by the Americans. Hemmed in by the United States and its allies to the east, China was now doing what Wang Jisi, the dean of Peking University's School of International Relations and advisor to Hu Jintao, demanded in 2012, namely, 'marching westward' to escape encirclement. Other aims of the programme were to prevent the PRC's economy from overheating, by offshoring unproductive and excessive investment to riskier but potentially higher reward countries, and to cultivate soft power in nearby states.[47]

Whatever the motivation behind 'Belt and Road', a tsunami of Chinese cash and infrastructure projects engulfed Central Asia and the Indian Ocean. The China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China were generously recapitalised in order to provide large loans in support of 'Belt and Road'. Ports like Gwadar in Pakistan and Hambantota in Sri Lanka, and the Sinamalé Bridge in the Maldives, formerly called the China-Maldives Friendship Bridge, largely paid for by the PRC, are not commercially viable, and their cost may never be recouped. Their purpose may be partly to soak up excess capital and building capacity, but the main aims surely are to provide leverage over governments, improve access, and facilitate passage of Chinese shipping. These ventures were flanked by a 'Digital Silk Road' of fibre-optic cables, 5G networks, and energy pipelines, deepening the PRC's strategic footprint. The historian Peter Frankopan, who sees all of

this in context of the old Silk Road, remarked that ‘the axis on which the globe spins was slowly turning back to where it lay for millennia’.[48]

The Belt and Road project also spread farther afield. China invested in port facilities in Hamburg, Germany, and Piraeus, Greece. It put money into rail links across the Balkans and Eastern Europe in the hope of connecting them to the new roads and railways radiating out from the PRC itself. For a while, much of the EU was linked to Beijing for infrastructural purposes through the ‘Sixteen Plus One’ framework, which connected the PRC with sixteen member states, mainly in Eastern Europe. In Africa, Chinese ‘Railpolitik’ linked the interior with ports to facilitate resource extraction. Some observers, echoing Rudyard Kipling’s phrase about the ‘White Man’s Burden’, even referred—albeit critically—to Beijing’s ‘Yellow Man’s Burden’ on the continent. Despite widespread unease about Chinese ‘colonialism’ and ‘manipulation’, their investments were widely welcomed across the world. Because Beijing dispensed with the political conditionalities—such as transparency and human rights requirements—imposed by Washington and Brussels (apart from insisting on derecognition of Taiwan), China seemed to give many African, Latin American, and even Balkan countries their best chance of acquiring vital infrastructure.[49]

These moves were accompanied by a more assertive naval policy. In 2015, the PRC articulated its ‘open-sea’ ambition, which entailed building a ‘blue-water’ navy capable of defending China’s interests beyond the first island chain and the Malacca Strait, in the Western Pacific and Indian Ocean. This would require overseas bases beyond the access provided by the many PRC-funded infrastructural projects. In August 2017, nearly six hundred years after Cheng He made landfall on the east coast of Africa, the PRC opened a facility at Djibouti which could house ten thousand troops, a dozen attack helicopters, and a naval flotilla. This gave China a potential chokehold on the nearby Bab el-Mandeb, or at least the opportunity to influence maritime norms and security arrangements in this key region.[50]

The main Chinese focus, though, was closer to home. In the East China Sea, the PRC faced off against Japan. The conflict was ostensibly waged between fishing and coastguard vessels, but China’s main weapon was economic. In September 2010, after Chinese fishermen had been arrested by Japanese authorities, Beijing imposed a two-month ban on shipments of

rare earths to Japan. This was followed by political clashes with Tokyo over the Senkaku Islands (also known as the Diaoyu or Diaoyutai Islands) in the East China Sea, close to Taiwan, in 2012–2013. In the south-west, China confronted India. Beijing reiterated its claims to substantial parts of its neighbour, including the entire province of Arunachal Pradesh. There were minor military skirmishes in Ladakh in 2013, and a bigger eruption in Doklam in 2017. Then, in 2020, China and India clashed violently again over Ladakh. After the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the PRC tried to lessen tension with India in order to avoid driving it into the Western camp.

Beijing also laid claim to the entire South China Sea on the basis of historical rights epitomised by the ‘nine-dash-line’ map. In 2014, the PRC started to build and militarise islands throughout the area. This was partly to secure the minerals located there, but chiefly to protect the country’s principal trade artery. The littoral states were simply pushed aside. Those who resisted, like the Philippines, were militarily and economically intimidated. Once again, China used its trade power to send a signal—for example, by banning the import of Philippine bananas after Manila rejected Beijing’s claims to Scarborough Shoal. In other parts of South-East Asia, including Laos and Cambodia, the PRC’s leadership was widely accepted.[51]

China also hardened its position on Taiwan. Beijing regarded the island as a domestic matter and its absorption into the PRC as an act of reunification, not as territorial expansion. The problem was that the Republic of China (ROC) was politically and culturally slipping away from the mainland. More and more of its population identified as Taiwanese rather than Chinese, and there was a real possibility that the island would declare independence. In 2017, Xi announced that the problem could ‘not be postponed indefinitely’. This was primarily a political imperative, but PRC strategists also emphasised that the ‘resolution’ of the Taiwan problem would help resolve another one by breaking the ‘island chain’ of US bases hemming in China.[52]

The new dynamism over Taiwan was reflected in a series of escalations. In August 2021, Lithuania permitted the establishment of a ‘Taiwanese’—rather than ‘Taipei’—Representative Office in its capital Vilnius. Beijing reacted with a ban on Lithuanian imports. The following year, the Speaker

of the US House of Representatives, Nancy Pelosi, made a high-profile visit to Taiwan. Beijing responded with air and sea manoeuvers and rocket tests, which more or less sealed off the island for three days.

All of these concerns, though, paled before that of regime survival. In 2019, Xi issued a list of core CCP interests in order of priority. Right at the top was ‘the Party’s leadership and China’s socialist system’. This came ahead of any socioeconomic goals and indeed of ‘the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’—that is, the recognition of its Great Power status and aims. The list was, of course, a sequence as well as a hierarchy, because in Xi’s mind the consolidation of CCP rule at home was a precondition for national assertion abroad.[53]

The threats to the party’s authority were real. In Xinjiang, Muslim separatists launched a series of spectacular terrorist attacks on train stations and other installations in 2014–2017. There were serious protests in Tibet and Hong Kong, and there were the internal stresses of the COVID pandemic, which began in China and lasted there longer than almost anywhere else. Given widespread vaccine hesitancy, justified scepticism about the efficiency of its own vaccines, and the political impossibility of accepting Western ones, the PRC was reluctant to open up its society once the immediate danger had passed. The two-month Shanghai lockdown in March–April 2022, which took place long after most of the rest of the world had returned to normality, led to widespread unrest. In Beijing’s eyes, these challenges were multiplied by its belief that outside powers were stirring up or weaponising internal unrest in order to weaken China on the international stage.

The regime responded vigorously. Surveillance was increased. This had begun in the late 1990s and the early 2000s with the development of a ‘Great Firewall’ designed to block Western websites, and then the creation of a legal and normative framework conducive to censorship, which progressed to mass surveillance, systematic disinformation, data mining, and intimidation. Unless they used Virtual Private Networks, or VPNs, PRC citizens had no access to most Western news services, or services such as Google, Facebook, and Twitter (now ‘X’). In 2005, the Skynet project had created a network of high-definition, round-the-clock video coverage of urban areas. In 2015, this was extended to the rural areas through the ‘Sharp

Eyes' project. That same year, the authorities implemented a grid management system, which divides the country into smaller discrete zones of surveillance, the better to control the population.[54]

In the CCP's view, though, the best way to combat subversion was to promote orthodoxy. 'Document No. 9' warned that 'failure in the ideological sphere' could 'result in major disorders' and called upon party leaders to 'pay close attention to their work in the ideological sphere'. Critical to this was the rigorous policing of history. Xi vowed to clamp down on what he called 'historical nihilism', that is, heretical readings of the past that might challenge the power of the party or threaten China's global rise. For this reason, the government rigorously suppressed independent historians, journals, and popular festivals with potential political undertones. In 2021, Xi issued a resolution on how the CCP's history should be interpreted, only the third time this had happened since Mao.[55]

The traditionally Turkic and Muslim province of Xinjiang became the main laboratory for repression. The word 'Xinjiang' translates as 'new frontier' or 'New Territory', and the region had historically been considered a colony, in effect China's wild west. Beijing stepped up Han settlement there beginning in the 1990s, so that native Uighurs are now in a minority. Hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of the native population were incarcerated, and many prisoners were compelled to perform forced labour in Chinese factories. The vast majority of the detainees most likely had nothing to do with any direct opposition to the regime, still less with terrorism.[56]

If most Chinese took pride in the PRC's new global status, the elite was divided about the strategy to be pursued. They were deeply conscious of the history of the rise and fall of the Great Powers and determined to avoid the 'mistakes' of the past. In 2005, Zheng Bijian, who had recently retired as the executive vice president of the Central Party School of the Chinese Communist Party, sought to reassure Western audiences in a much-discussed article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine. China, he wrote, had a 'strategy' which would 'transcend the traditional ways for great powers to emerge' (i.e., through war). In particular, the PRC would not follow the

paths of Nazi Germany or of Imperial Japan. China would 'rise', so the message went, but 'peacefully'. Some hoped that China could avoid conflict through geopolitical re-orientation. Advocates of the 'Belt and Road' programme saw it in explicitly 'Mackinderian' terms as enabling the PRC to consolidate a Chinese 'heartland' which would balance the West. Others, such as the Beijing University professor Jiang Shigong, argued that China should concentrate on constructing a 'great space' which would co-exist with rival 'Great Spaces', along the lines advocated by the Nazi international lawyer Carl Schmitt. Each would have a civilisation at its core, in China's case Confucianism. To quote the Chongqing Communist Party School scholar Fang Xu's article of July 2018, the PRC wanted to 'Say Farewell to Universal Empire [US dominance] with a *Großraum* order'.[57]

Fear and resentment of the 'Anglo-Saxons' is not as marked in the PRC as it is in Russia, but it forms an important part of the political imaginary there. Chinese voices routinely accuse the British and Americans, and the wider West, of pursuing their selfish interests in the guise of the 'general good'. In 2017, for example, the official PRC organ *China Daily* quoted the British historian E. H. Carr's famous book *The Twenty Years' Crisis* to the effect that 'this kind of hypocrisy is a special and characteristic peculiarity of the Anglo-Saxon mind'. More recently, the PRC ambassador to Australia condemned the agreement between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States to share nuclear submarine technology (AUKUS) as representative of an 'Anglo-Saxon bloc'.[58]

As the PRC grew more assertive on the world stage and expanded its reach, there were some who feared that this would provoke the same hostility as that directed towards Germany, Japan, and other 'challengers' in the past. Zhengyu Wu of Renmin University in Beijing, one of the country's most prominent experts on geopolitics, warned that China's land reclamation schemes in the South China Sea would bring about the very international coalition that China was trying to avoid. Besides, he pointed out, control of the near seas was of little use to a globalised Chinese economy if it could simply be cut off further out by the US Navy. Nor, he added, was eastward expansion on land the solution, because it was American policy to prevent any single power from dominating the 'heartland'.[59]

The PRC's Great Power ambitions are underpinned by a very considerable resource base. By 2020, when its GDP was nearly as large as that of the entire European Union, it was the world's second largest national economy, and had been for some time. Only that of the United States was bigger, and if purchasing power parity had been taken into account, the two economies were probably about equal. In terms of manufacturing capacity, the PRC was the world's superpower, with nearly 29 percent of global capacity against about 17 percent for the United States. It had the largest foreign exchange reserves in the world. Moreover, the Chinese economy was still growing at an impressive clip, albeit not as rapidly as previously.[60]

Behind these headline figures lay economic strength in depth. Per capita income was still well behind that of the developed world, but it was rising rapidly. There was now a huge Chinese middle class, much of it very well educated, at least in science and engineering subjects. While the PRC was the world champion in intellectual property theft, it had also become a major innovator in its own right. This was most obvious with regard to renewables, where by 2023 the PRC was producing the vast majority of the world's solar cells and other green technologies, such as electric batteries and electric vehicles. Together with the country's dominance of rare-earth refining, this gave Beijing enormous leverage over global green supply chains. If this trend continued, the distinguished American political scientist Graham Allison pointed out, 'the West's green future' would be 'red'.[61]

This performance has allowed the PRC to fund what most reckon to be the second strongest armed forces in the world. Its military expenditure in 2021 was the second largest after the United States. To be sure, this amount ($207 billion) was much less than a third of the US figure ($754 billion) in dollar terms, and still less than half when purchasing power parity is taken into account. It was the trajectory, though, that mattered. The 2021 figure was up 72 percent on that for 2012, at the start of Xi's reign, nearly 5 percent in the past year alone. Though these figures should be taken with a grain of salt, the trend line was clear. Moreover, much of this additional spending has gone to high-tech projects, such as anti-ship ballistic missiles, stealth aircraft, cyber warfare, and a rapidly expanding blue-water navy.[62]

Even with this limited investment, the People's Liberation Army could field a formidable array of forces. Its total active military personnel in 2021

numbered 2,035,000, more than twice as many as Russia (900,000), and considerably more than the United States (1,395,350). These figures did not include the many paramilitary forces maintained by the PRC—for example, ‘grey-zone’ maritime militias, which even have mine-laying capacities. The PRC had 5,400 main battle tanks, more than twice as many as the United States (2,645), more than three times as many artillery pieces, and substantially more combat aircraft and long-range surface-to-air missile launchers. Many of these are of modern design.

The connection between the PRC’s industrial might and its military might is illustrated by its rapid naval expansion. Between 2014 and 2018, the country built more ships than are in the entire Royal Navy. By the end of the decade, the People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) was larger than the US Navy in terms of numbers of vessels, if not actual tonnage. Again, these were nearly all of sophisticated design and construction. Moreover, the PLA has invested heavily in joint operations capability and cyber and space assets, and it appears to have made the shift from a twentieth-century mass army to a modern, agile, and technologically advanced military.

If China is weaker on the nuclear front, with only a fraction (about 600) of the operational warheads of the United States (5,550) and Russia (6,257), it still enjoyed the capacity to deliver a ‘second strike’ through its inter-continental ballistic missiles and ballistic missile submarines, and could thus be confident of deterring a nuclear attack. Besides, the PRC’s nuclear weapons programme, which is the least transparent in the world, is currently undergoing rapid expansion. It is reasonable to expect an arsenal of about 1,000 warheads by 2030 and perhaps 1,500 by 2035. The H-6K strategic bomber can be modified to carry nuclear weapons, too, thus giving China a nuclear ‘triad’—the capacity to deliver a strike by land- and sea-based rockets and by air.

That said, the PRC also suffers from serious vulnerabilities. The environmental challenges produced by communism and state-controlled capitalism are practically insurmountable, despite heavy investments in desalination, inter-basin transfers, and efficiency measures. There is also the demographic time bomb laid by the one-child policy, which threatens to leave the PRC with a large pensioner population being supported by dwindling younger-age cohorts. China’s population peaked much earlier than expected—in 2021—and has been declining every year since. Despite

this, it is unlikely for cultural and political reasons that the CCP will try to make good the deficiency by encouraging immigration. A shrinking working-age population could slow economic growth, strain social security systems, and reduce the pool of people available for recruitment into the armed forces.[63]

The Chinese economy is also showing increasing signs of fragility. Its growth model was based on exports and construction. The former is now under threat from lower-priced competitors and American tariffs, the latter from lack of demand and crushing debt. Because China has struggled with moving from an export-oriented economy to one more based on domestic consumption, many warehouses are overflowing with unsold goods. In 2019, Xiang Songzuo, a senior economist at Renmin University in Beijing, warned that 'China's economy is all built on speculation, and everything is over-leveraged'. Since then, the second largest Chinese property developer, Evergrande, has gone bankrupt (2023). Meanwhile, the inflow of capital has slowed considerably while the outflow has increased, as regulatory crackdowns and geopolitical tensions fuel capital flight. Much of China's domestic credit comes from shadow banks operating without a licence, which is very risky. Worse still, the Belt and Road Initiative, whatever its strategic benefits, cost the PRC about $240 billion in bailouts for struggling creditors by 2021.[64]

Apart from its economic leverage, China can menace its critics worldwide through its growing technological capabilities. Its standard-bearers, Huawei and ZTE, have not only cornered increasing market share, but through the construction of 'backdoors' have made Beijing a 'surveillance superpower'. In 2018, for example, it emerged that the headquarters of the African Union, built six years earlier with funding from the Chinese government and sophisticated Huawei network equipment, had been the subject of daily data breaches by PRC agents using that same equipment. Some also suspect, though nothing has ever been proven, that TikTok, an app much beloved of young people across the world, has been used to transfer data to the PRC. Likewise, the Chinese concept of 'smart cities' is widely seen as a vehicle for PRC surveillance on a large scale.[65]

China's commercial technological capabilities probably contribute more to its soft than to its hard power. Just as major American corporations

support US ambitions overseas in intangible ways, so do ‘brands’ like Huawei, TikTok, and Temu help promote the PRC. In some cases, the politicisation is overt: For example, the Chinese gaming industry routinely frames the Japanese as devils. In other cases, the approach is much more subtle, as with the regime’s international media, CGTN and Xinhua. These have greatly expanded their activities over the past decade but have been careful to ensure a good leavening of established Western journalists to preempt accusations of bias. Moreover, TikTok’s algorithm can subtly shape news trends and news exposure.

The PRC also enjoys considerable ideological reach across many parts of the world. Despite often claiming that it would not export its values or get involved in the domestic politics of other countries, Beijing invested heavily in relationships with governments in the Global South, many of them repressive regimes, offering them an alternative to the West. In a 2017 speech to the Nineteenth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi was quite open about this, noting that ‘the China model for a better social governance system offers a new option for other countries and nations… who want to speed up their development while preserving their independence’. For example, in Uganda, the PRC sponsors the Oliver Tambo Leadership Academy as a ‘politico-military school’, and in Tanzania, it supports the Mwalimu Nyerere Ideological School. Beijing has also signed content-sharing agreements with local media outlets in Africa, South-East Asia, and Latin America. In Western countries, Beijing’s influence comes via the Confucius Institutes, which are ostensibly intended to promote Chinese language and culture but are really vehicles for PRC soft power. By the early 2020s, these measures had provoked a vigorous response in some countries, such as Australia, and something close to submission in others, such as New Zealand, though resistance is mounting even there.[66]

As a Great Power, the PRC has positioned itself, and is seen by many, as a ‘civilisation state’. In March 2023, Xi launched a ‘Global Civilisation Initiative’ at a Dialogue with World Parties High Level Meeting in Beijing. This was attended by politicians and intellectuals from across the world. In his opening speech, Xi called for ‘respect for the diversity of civilisations and the principles of equality’. The PRC leader also sought to promote a

‘community of common destiny for mankind’, positioning China as an alternative model to Western liberalism. Beijing was offering not a renationalisation of the global economy on Trumpian lines, but a new form of multilateral development without Western tutelage. The purpose behind this rhetoric was to present the PRC as the leader of an alternative world order in an era of deglobalisation.[67]

The PRC’s reputation as a distinct global civilisational ‘pole’ varied across the world. In the Western world, opinion was divided. The United States became critical of Beijing from an early stage; Britain followed suit in 2017; France and Germany were sympathetic for a bit longer but gradually turned away; and Russia-leaning outliers, such as Hungary, saw in Xi something of a kindred spirit. In South-East Asia, opinion was also divided, with Taiwan and the Philippines firmly resistant to Beijing’s charms while others were more respectful of its achievements. In large parts of Africa and Latin America, China was not only seen as a developmental model but also welcomed as a hedge against Western tutelage. Even in these regions, though, there was unease at the cost and intrusiveness of Chinese programmes, which often came freighted with debt and were rolled out by PRC rather than local contractors.[68]

It is unclear how resilient the PRC is. There is no doubt that the country has repeatedly demonstrated a capacity to endure. Even during the long ‘century of humiliation’, the people of China and its leaders never forgot their heroic past or gave up the vision of restoring Great Power status. During the Second World War and the first decades of CCP rule, the country put up with enormous suffering in pursuit of this goal. More recently, the ‘grand bargain’ which the population has struck with the CCP —to surrender political rights in return for economic prosperity and a growing global role—has been largely unquestioned. The PRC is, by Western standards, plainly a repressive state, but it is not a prison like the old Soviet Bloc. Over the past two decades, millions of its citizens have travelled abroad and returned; only a tiny minority have claimed asylum. Whatever ordinary Chinese people feel about the regime, it is likely that Xi enjoys a high level of societal support for his project of ‘national rejuvenation’ that could help sustain him throughout any confrontations to come.[69]

That said, there are imponderables suggesting that China might be more brittle than it appears. The country went through repeated cycles of political instability during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its political and societal stability is very much an early twenty-first-century phenomenon. The persistence of dissent, including among disillusioned Marxists, is large enough to worry the authorities. Much of it now manifests online, where it is harder to suppress. There is also a question mark over the robustness of Chinese youth, which is both highly materialistic and increasingly unmotivated. Critics speak of a Tang Ping (Lie Flat) and 'Strawberry' generation which, cosseted by parents and grandparents, and demoralised by increasing unemployment, bruises easily. If put under serious pressure, Chinese society could cohere, but it might also simply collapse. In short, nobody knows how the PRC would fare if really put to the test in a major Great Power confrontation.[70]

In retrospect, the years 2017 and 2018 appear to be the moment of 'Peak China'. If the PRC was only a 'partial' power at the start of the decade, lacking some critical capabilities especially in the naval sphere, it appeared to become a much more rounded actor as the decade began to draw to a close, with formidable capabilities across the military spectrum. Moreover, the Chinese economy was still growing at a ferocious rate. The mood was summed up by remarks made by the second highest CCP leader, Premier Li Keqiang, who, in November 2017, told a visiting President Trump that China's modernisation was now complete, and that the role of the United States would simply be to provide the necessary raw materials, such as food and oil, to sustain it.[71]

This period also saw the apotheosis of Xi Jinping. In January 2017, he led the biggest ever Chinese contingent (which included Jack Ma of Alibaba) to the World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos, where he warned against the rising tide of economic protectionism. The world's capitalist elite—still reeling from the Brexit referendum, the election of Donald Trump, his 'America First' inaugural address, and his subsequent withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership—lapped up his speech, forgetting, perhaps, that the PRC was among the most protectionist countries in the world. The founder of the WEF, Klaus Schwab, even

argued that ‘in a world marked by great uncertainty and volatility the international community is looking to China’. The Portuguese prime minister, António Costa, remarked, more astutely, that he was ‘quite surprised to see the Chinese president make a speech that was supposed to be made by the American president, and the American president make a speech that the Chinese president was supposed to make’.[72]

In the autumn of 2017, nine months after Davos, Xi set out his international vision to the 19th Party Congress in Beijing. For the first fifteen years, from 2020 to 2035, he envisaged a primarily domestic transformation of the country into a ‘fully developed nation’. In the ten years between 2035 and 2045, the PRC would become ‘a global leader in terms of comprehensive national power and international influence’. A year later, ‘Xi Jinping Thought’ was written into the constitution of the PRC. That same year, the term limits on his presidency were abolished, effectively making Xi dictator for life. To many, the man and the country seemed unstoppable.

By the middle of the 2020s, though, the outlook for China and its ruler had darkened. The economy was in crisis. China dropped from having 75 percent of US GDP in dollar terms to 65 percent, though some of this can be attributed to exchange-rate shifts, inflation, and post-pandemic growth differentials. China’s working-age population had been declining since 2014. The country was projected to lose more than six hundred million inhabitants—two whole Americas—by the end of the century. This is a huge loss, and possibly signifies a terminal crisis for the regime. Perhaps it can only be addressed through mass immigration, something the CCP is currently entirely unwilling to countenance. At the same time, counterintuitively, youth unemployment hit record highs of over 20 percent, causing the regime to stop publishing figures temporarily in 2023. Moreover, the country’s younger generation seemed adrift, both economically and psychologically, buffeted by narrowing opportunities and unrealisable family expectations and beset by mental health problems. Would China grow old before it grew rich, and would its youth go mad before their country became great?[73]

In the international sphere, the United States was pushing back vigorously, vowing to erect high fences and to keep China out of its ‘yard’.

Relations with the European Union were deteriorating. Japan was rearming. Previously loyal regional states such as Laos and Cambodia were seeking to escape the Chinese orbit; there were rumblings even in Myanmar.

In this context, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 further isolated China. Beijing, though, could not allow Putin to be defeated. It therefore supported Moscow's efforts to cast the struggle in terms of a clash between the exploitative West, led by America, and the 'Global Majority' led by China and Russia. In 2024, the PRC even engaged in joint 'anti-terrorism' exercises with Belarus, five kilometres from the Polish border, right on the doorstep of the European Union and NATO. The two principal global spheres of confrontation, Europe and East Asia, largely separate at the start of the previous decade, had now merged into a single confrontation between the authoritarian and democratic powers, and the PRC was within the weaker bloc.[74]

Simultaneously, Xi's own international standing plummeted. When he flew to Europe in 2024, he was received in France, to be sure, but otherwise only in Serbia, Hungary, and Russia. Within seven years, Xi went from being touted as a global leader by the Davos elite to being part of what many saw as an axis of losers made up of Russia, Iran, and North Korea. At home, Xi was feared but also hated for his purges. He could not resign because he would be immediately arrested by the partisans of those he had purged.

It is not clear what impact 'Peak China' will have on the PRC's behaviour in the international system. Some suggest that Beijing might be inclined to find a way out of its domestic difficulties through international adventurism, or could seek to preempt its global decline by precipitating a conflict with the West—for example, by attacking Taiwan. Those fearing this type of situation have noted that Xi has called on the PLA to be 'ready' to take the island by 2027. Others point out that the PRC has no tradition of deflecting internal problems outwards, though it certainly does have a record of military adventures against its neighbours, as the events of 1950, 1962, and 1979 amply attest. Besides, even if China loses ground economically, it will remain the world's second biggest economy and one of its most important military powers. Adverse trends notwithstanding, the country's Great Power status is not under threat. The only scenario under

which the PRC would cease being a Great Power is catastrophic defeat at the hands of another Great Power, such as the United States.[75]

Much will depend on how the PRC, and especially Xi, react to shifting time horizons. According to the prevailing Sino-Marxist world view, China may have started behind, but its global rise under the leadership of the CCP is not only inevitable, but a restoration of a status briefly interrupted by a century of humiliation. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, Chinese elites expected that this process would be a slow one, and throughout the 1990s and early 2000s they fretted that the United States was slow to wane, and that true multipolarity was still far off. Then time seemed to speed up following the financial crisis of 2008, and it appeared to speed up again with the Western travails around Brexit, Trump, and the pandemic. As late as January 2021, Xi was claiming that 'time and momentum' were 'on [their] side'. So long as the CCP believes that to be the case, war is unlikely, at least for now.[76]

But for Marxists, time and history cannot go in reverse. The PRC can rise, but it must not fall. Neither Xi nor the CCP will lose much sleep over mere GDP figures. They will always prioritise regime security over economic growth, and even over national greatness abroad. What they cannot tolerate is going backwards over Taiwan. If the island were to declare independence, and vindicate it, that could only be understood as a breach of the idea that the two parts of China were gradually but inevitably converging. It would almost certainly result in an invasion or tight blockade, which in turn would provoke a major confrontation. From that sort of confrontation, the PRC would emerge as either the greatest power in the world or possibly not a Great Power at all.

Eleven

The Survival of Russia

'RUSSIA', VLADIMIR PUTIN once remarked, 'is never as strong as it wants to be and never as weak as it is thought to be.' After emerging as a Great Power in the eighteenth century, the Tsarist Empire completely collapsed in the face of revolution during the First World War. Following a period of chaos, the new Soviet Union clawed its way back to Great Power status, becoming one of the victors of the Second World War. After a prolonged confrontation with the West, that regime disintegrated in turn, unleashing another round of instability. Then, at the turn of the millennium, Vladimir Putin set about restoring Russia's Great Power status. His country's case exemplifies the high-stakes quest for greatness in its purest, most naked form, driven by historical traumas and ambitions, based almost exclusively on military might, often in defiance of economic reality and rationality, and in open rejection of the rules-based international order. The Kremlin has profoundly shaped the world around it by forcing all of the powers discussed in this book, and many other states, too, to react to its policies. Today, as Putin's armies struggle in Ukraine, Russia confronts the question of whether its Great Power ambitions are sustainable.[1]

The state of Muscovy first became a major actor in north-eastern Europe in the sixteenth century. It traced its historical roots to the medieval kingdom of Kievan Rus, a polity which spanned present-day Ukraine and parts of Russia. After the fall of Byzantium to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, Muscovy claimed to represent the principle of Orthodox Christianity in the world, donning for that purpose the mantle of 'Third Rome'. Over the next two hundred years, Russia—as the state came to be known from the mid-

sixteenth century—alternated between periods of internal chaos (‘Times of Trouble’) and severe autocracy, often in quick succession. It also expanded steadily, mainly to the west, south, and east. In the Far East, though, the Russian advance was brought to a temporary halt by the Qing dynasty, which at that point was much stronger than the Tsarist Empire. After a force of Russian explorers was routed by the Chinese, Peter the Great accepted their control of the Amur Valley in the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689.[2]

It was only in the eighteenth century that Russia was accepted into what became the European pentarchy of Great Powers. This was largely the work of Peter the Great, who vanquished Swedish invaders at the legendary Battle of Poltava in 1709, and Catherine the Great, who crushed the Turks and partitioned Poland. In 1779, Russia was made a guarantor of the Holy Roman Empire, a sign of its new status. It was also in the eighteenth century, though, that European powers began to think about the containment of Russia, most importantly Britain, because it was alarmed by tsarist ambitions in the Baltic, Black Sea, and Mediterranean.

In the meantime, the Russian Empire also expanded eastwards. Shortly before his death, Peter the Great wrote that he had been thinking about ‘finding a passage to China and India through the Arctic Sea’. In the 1760s, the Russians arrived in Alaska, which they formally claimed at the end of the century. Russian traders and explorers also appeared in California and built a fort there, much to the chagrin of the Spanish and later Mexican authorities.[3]

Thanks to its central role in the defeat of Napoleon, whose invasion was repulsed in 1812, Russia became a leading light of the Vienna Settlement and the Concert of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century. In territorial terms, the Tsarist Empire now stretched from Vladivostok in the east to Poland in the west, from the Arctic in the north to the Caucasus and Central Asia in the south. It was one of the largest empires the world had ever seen, and certainly the most extensive contiguous landmass. Russia also stood for the principle of conservatism at home and abroad: for ‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality’. The Tsarist Empire served as the ‘gendarme of Europe’, intervening to suppress revolutionary movements in Poland and Hungary. Its secret agents were feared across the continent.

This surge in Russian power also provoked the British and French. As liberal powers, their hostility was partly ideological, but their main concern was that Russia would upset the European equilibrium. This rivalry resulted in the Crimean War and the defeat of the Tsarist Empire by 1856. It took Saint Petersburg twenty years to break out of the fetters subsequently imposed by London and Paris, especially to restore Russia's position in the Black Sea. The long period of Russian advances to the west and south-west were over, at least for the time being.

If Russia was temporarily halted in Europe, it embarked on a period of unprecedented expansion in Asia. This expansion was mainly driven by the fear of being overmatched or preempted by rival powers. One of Russia's foreign ministers in the early nineteenth century argued that Russia needed to engage in Asia to balance the growing British and French Empires, and from mid-century, the United States as well. One Russian traveller referred to the Amur Valley as 'Russia's Mississippi', a space where it could find and develop the resources it needed to match the other global powers. Russia seized huge swathes of northern China—over six hundred thousand square kilometres of land—from the Qing in what the Chinese termed the 'unequal treaties' of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860), and Manchuria fell under de facto Russian control. Towards the end of the century, Tsar Nicholas II believed that being a Great Power in Asia was vital for the empire's standing in the world.[4]

There was also the direct strategic threat from the British, French, and Americans, who were appearing on Russia's eastern flank and penetrating the now ailing Qing Empire. During the Crimean War, a Franco-British force had attacked Russia's Kamchatka Peninsula in 1854, and in the 1850s and 1860s Britain and France both intervened decisively in China in the Second Opium War, building up strong positions there. In the Pacific, where the Russians abandoned Fort Ross in California in 1841, where Commodore Matthew Perry's mission opened Japan to foreign commerce and influence in the 1850s, and where Russia sold Alaska to the Americans in 1867, the Tsarist Empire was in retreat before the United States.

Looking around them, Russian strategists could be forgiven for thinking themselves 'encircled'. To the west, there were the hostile European powers, Britain, France, and increasingly Germany and Austria-Hungary.

To the south, there was the British Empire, which was advancing up the Persian Gulf and moving out from India. To the east, the European powers and the Americans were taking over China. Worse still, Japan modernised rapidly to challenge Russia in Manchuria, defeating the Tsarist Empire on sea and land in 1904–1905. The resulting anxieties about threats on multiple fronts, particularly given the lack of obvious natural barriers, such as rivers, mountains, or seas, behind which Russia could retreat, have characterised Russian policy ever since.

Russia tried to modernise and ‘catch up’ in the face of outside threats, especially after the Crimean catastrophe. The serfs were emancipated in 1861, a major step towards modernising society and agriculture. Considerable sums were invested in infrastructure, especially railways. Defeat in the Russo-Japanese War spurred attempts at political participation through the establishment of an elected parliament with limited powers.

A combination of geopolitical shifts and astute tsarist diplomacy, beginning with the rapprochement with France in the 1890s, finally enabled Russia to break out of encirclement by 1907 through the establishment of the Triple Entente with France and Britain. It entered the First World War as part of the stronger coalition, but struggled so badly against Germany that the old regime collapsed by early 1917. The subsequent Bolshevik revolution provoked not only a civil war but hostile intervention by Britain, France, the United States, and Japan. Poland invaded in 1920. Large swathes of territory in the west were ceded to new states; Ukraine was temporarily independent during the Russian Civil War. This new ‘time of troubles’ lasted several years during which Russia became a battleground stalked by famine, killing, internal division, and outside interference. Eventually, the Bolsheviks established total control over a reduced but still massive state.

The new Soviet Union stood for the principle of global communism. It believed that it would only be safe if revolutions took place across the globe, especially in Europe, a view most ardently expressed by the creator of the Red Army, Leon Trotsky. In other respects, the new state inherited many of the old tsarist anxieties about ‘encirclement’. To the west, the leaders in Moscow fretted about the revival of German power. To the east, they worried about the Japanese. Above all, they feared what they called the ‘Anglo-Saxons’: the British Empire and the United States. It was these two

powers that controlled the global capitalist system, and they were militarily present across much of the world, including India, the Middle East, and the Pacific. In the view of Joseph Stalin, who became leader in the 1920s, this meant that the Soviet Union should pursue a policy of ‘Socialism in One Country’, concentrating on industrialisation at home and disrupting hostile coalitions abroad.

Thanks to its central role in the coalition which defeated Germany and Japan in the Second World War, the Soviet Union became one of the global ordering powers after 1945. It was one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council with a veto right. The Soviet Union increased its territory through the annexation of the Baltic states, half of the former East Prussia, parts of Poland and Romania, and some Japanese islands. It also established a belt of satellite countries in Eastern Europe and dominated the Warsaw Pact collective security mechanism, intervening militarily in East Germany in 1953, Hungary in 1956, and Czechoslovakia in 1968. Throughout the resulting confrontation with the democratic and capitalist West known as the Cold War, the Soviet Union was one of the most important actors in the international system. As one of two acknowledged superpowers, it enjoyed a unique status greater even than that of the old Tsarist Empire. This fact, which was recognised through the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) between the United States and the Soviet Union, which concentrated on the two countries’ nuclear weapons arsenals, and the Helsinki Accords on a broader set of issues in the 1970s, with thirty-five participating states, lent important legitimacy to the Soviet regime at home, at least for a while.[5]

During this period, the Soviet Union enjoyed truly global reach. It supported friendly regimes in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America, even stationing nuclear-armed missiles in Cuba for a brief period. These moves were designed to expand Moscow’s influence in the ‘Third World’ and to offset NATO’s strength in Europe. The Russian nuclear arsenal gained parity with that of the United States. Yet with global ambitions came global anxieties. Moscow fell out with the Chinese communists over the direction of the international communist movement after Stalin’s death. Mao loudly questioned the ‘unequal treaties’ and launched an attack on Soviet forces along the Ussuri River in 1969. With

intensifying tensions with NATO in Europe, and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Soviet Union once again felt ‘encircled’ on three sides. The disastrous invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was mainly conceived as an attempt to break out of this straitjacket.

These Soviet actions looked aggressive, and they were, but what was really driving them was a sense of weakness towards the West. This is why Moscow laid such stress on the achievement of nuclear ‘parity’ with Washington and the status which came from having this recognised through the strategic arms limitation agreements of the 1970s. This was also why the Soviet Union was prepared to make surface concessions on human rights at Helsinki in 1975 in return for the acceptance of the 1945 borders and the establishment of a wider collaborative organisation, the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which later morphed into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). The OSCE remained Moscow’s preferred framework for the continent, at least until 2022.

By the middle of the 1980s, the Soviet Union was visibly struggling under the weight of its Great Power burden. Its gerontocratic elite was beset by an array of challenging problems: economic stagnation along with an expensive overseas aid programme; a quagmire in Afghanistan, where the West and Pakistan were funding a guerilla war; internal dissident movements that were difficult to suppress, as well as nationalist movements in the satellite states—and separatist ones within the Soviet Union—that were difficult to contain; and a renewed arms race, unleashed by US President Ronald Reagan.

A new, younger leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, attempted to revive the communist system through liberalisation. His aim was to establish a ‘Common European Home’ in which East and West co-existed happily. At this, he failed. His reforms led instead to the unravelling, first, of the eastern bloc in 1989, and then of the Soviet Union itself at the end of 1991. With the end of the Cold War, Germany was reunified and the Baltic states, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia, and the Central Asian Republics became independent. Some parts of Russia itself, such as Chechnya, also attempted to break away. Russia claimed that the Americans had promised that NATO would not be enlarged eastward, but there is no

evidence that any formal commitment was made, and, in any case, that notion conflicted with the democratic right of the newly independent states of Central and Eastern Europe to choose their own alliances. With the exception of Belarus and (at that time) Ukraine, all of the former Warsaw Pact countries sought admission to NATO. When the first tranche—Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—joined in 1999, there was nothing Moscow could do about it.[6]

Meanwhile, Russia was in crisis. Moscow itself was convulsed by civil strife, with a coup attempt in 1991 and the burning of the parliament building in 1993. Privatisation of the economy was botched, creating a class of corrupt 'oligarchs'. There was widespread economic hardship, accelerated by the global financial crisis in 1998. GDP fell by about 40 percent during the decade. The huge navy built by the Soviets rusted in harbour. Russia withdrew from many overseas bases and drastically cut its armed forces, underlining the scale of the post-Soviet retreat. Moscow's position in the global system declined dramatically.

The 1990s were therefore experienced as a traumatic period in Russian history, one comparable to the past 'Time of Troubles' domestically, and a decade of 'humiliation' internationally. 'The people are humiliated and poor,' one ordinary citizen complained, 'and not long ago we were a Great Power because we had so many rockets and tanks and atom bombs.' 'We've lost Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia,' a World War II veteran lamented. 'We'll live to see the day when Gorbachev will be put on trial for that.… Where are our ideals? Where is our great power?'[7]

At the turn of the millennium, a little-known 'securocrat' named Vladimir Putin took power in Russia. He soon restored the state's authority. The oligarchs were warned to stay out of politics; those who resisted were expropriated, exiled, and sometimes murdered. Press freedoms were increasingly curbed, and in time the killing of journalists and dissidents became routine. Slowly but surely, the country, which had been sporadically liberalising, returned to dictatorship. Putin, an energy expert, leveraged Russia's huge oil and gas reserves to restore state pensions and increase welfare provision. In 2001, he boasted that for the first time in Russian history, social spending exceeded military expenditure.

The core objective of the new regime, though, next to its own survival, was the re-establishment of Russia's international position. 'Russia was and will remain a great power,' Putin stated in 1999. 'It is pre-conditioned by the inseparable characteristics of its geopolitical, economic and cultural existence.' These, he continued, 'determined the mentality of Russians and the policy of the government throughout the history of Russia and they cannot but do so at present'. 'To put it mildly,' Putin concluded, 'it is too early to bury Russia as a great power.' Indeed, given the internal and external threats to the country, the Russian leader believed—as he put it in his Annual Address of 2003, echoing earlier generations of tsarist and Soviet leaders—that 'Russia can only survive and develop within the existing borders if it stays a great power'.[8]

Putin believed that Russia's return to greatness required the replacement of American hegemony with a multipolar system. He therefore strengthened ties with the PRC, building on earlier attempts in the 1990s to balance the United States. Putin viewed the European Union as another 'pole' to balance the United States. In a landmark speech (in German) to the Bundestag, the lower house of the German parliament, in September 2001, he stated that 'Europe will reinforce its reputation of a strong and truly dependent centre of world politics soundly and for a long time if it succeeds in bringing together its own potential and that of Russia, including its human, territorial, and natural resources and its economic, cultural and defence potential'. The new Russian ruler saw such a 'Greater Europe' in equilibrium with but not hostile to the United States.[9]

Thus Putin did not, at first, believe that conflict with the West was inevitable. On the contrary, he spent his first two years in office trying to engage Washington. George Robertson, then NATO secretary general, reported that Putin said, 'I want Russia to be part of Western Europe. That's what I believe our destiny is.' He even, albeit only when asked, appeared to entertain the idea of Russia joining NATO. This was not just rhetoric. After the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on America, Putin immediately offered assistance. He encouraged the Central Asian states to host American bases to combat the Taliban in Afghanistan. Putin closed the Lourdes base in Cuba as a goodwill gesture in August 2002, and he wound down the old Soviet naval facility in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam. The admission of Central

and Eastern European nations into the European Union, which comported well with the ‘Greater Europe’ concept, was positively welcomed.[10]

However, Putin rapidly became disenchanted with the West, and in particular with the United States. In part, this was driven by a conceptual misunderstanding. He had envisaged a Great Power partnership with Washington and perhaps London, Paris, and Berlin, not joining the West on an equal basis with lesser states. ‘Russia is not going to stand in a queue with other countries that don’t matter,’ Putin remarked bitterly to the NATO secretary general in October 2001. The Russian leader was also offended by Western criticism of his brutal war in Chechnya, and by the general assumption that Russia would have to conform to Western values rather than co-creating a common future. For Russia to join NATO or the West meant Russia ceasing to be Russia. By definition, Russia could not accept the equality of its neighbours; in Moscow’s view, it needed to make them subject to the Kremlin’s will in order to achieve some kind of overall parity with the United States, which dominated not only its own immediate neighbourhood but also large parts of the globe.[11]

There were also a number of specific grievances, at home and abroad. Putin resented the influence of Western nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) that were trying to help the democratic transition in Russia, but which he increasingly regarded as handmaidens of Western colonisation, working hand in hand with US intelligence agencies. He was also alarmed by the US abrogation of the SALT I Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002. This move, which was intended to defend America and its allies from attack by Iran, North Korea, and other ‘rogue’ actors, was seen by Russians as a threat to their nuclear deterrent and as infrastructure that could be used to launch offensive weapons against them. ‘We now have a situation,’ Putin warned, ‘if these ballistic missiles are placed in Romania or Poland, if those missiles are also placed on the water using ships patrolling the Mediterranean Sea and the Northern Seas, and in Alaska—where Russian territory is encircled by these systems.’[12]

Putin suspected that the West was trying to take over and even break up Russia, using humanitarian intervention or terrorism as a pretext. In 2003, Moscow strongly opposed the invasion of Iraq and the deposition of Saddam Hussein. After a deadly Islamist terrorist attack in September 2004

on a school in the North Ossetian town of Beslan, which lay just inside Russia, Putin accused the West of supporting separatism in Chechnya. ‘Some want to tear off a juicy strip of our country,’ he warned. ‘Others help them to do it… because they think that Russia, as one of the greatest nuclear powers of the world, is still a threat and this threat has to be eliminated. And terrorism is only an instrument to achieve these goals.’[13]

But the biggest issue was Ukraine, a country of great strategic, economic, and cultural importance for Russia. When suspected vote-rigging led to the victory of the presidential candidate loyal to Moscow—Viktor Yanukovich—in November 2004, the resulting Orange Revolution protests brought in instead the pro-Western figure of Viktor Yushchenko. Putin did not really understand the great democratic transformation and national awakening taking place there, which he attributed to the machinations of Western intelligence services, NGOs, and financiers such as George Soros. He was determined to stop these ‘color revolutions’ from spreading to Russia itself. His rivals hoped for the opposite. ‘In the past,’ the prominent Russian liberal Boris Nemtsov remarked at the time, ‘people in Kiev used to look to Moscow. And now an awful lot of Muscovites, and not only Muscovites, Russians in general, will probably be looking to Kiev to see how people are fighting for their rights, fighting for truth and freedom.’[14]

In February 2007, Putin’s resentment exploded publicly in a notorious speech to the Munich Security Conference in which he lambasted the West for humiliating Russia. Alarmed by this rhetoric, and anxious that NATO was overextending itself, France and Germany, in April 2008, blocked a planned enlargement of the alliance to Ukraine and Georgia, but the idea that the two countries would eventually join was confirmed, causing further aggravation in Moscow.

Over the following years, Russia began to challenge the international security order ever more openly. In the spring of 2007, Estonia was subjected to a massive cyberattack almost certainly orchestrated from Moscow. A year later, Russian tanks rolled into Georgia, leading to the de facto annexation of that country’s South Ossetia region. Putin had long been determined to discipline Georgia: Eight years earlier, he had remarked that it was ‘leeching’ off Russian energy, was indebted to Moscow, and should respect Russia ‘as a big power’. But the real significance of the invasion,

Moscow's first major use of conventional forces beyond its borders since the end of the Cold War, was that it signalled Putin's willingness to use military means to block perceived Western encroachment. Meanwhile, Russia's soaring oil and gas revenues were used to fund a massive military modernisation programme. People began to speak of a 'New Cold War'.[15]

The attempted 'reset' of relations with Russia by the Obama administration from 2009 soon petered out. It got off to a bad start when the symbolic 'reset' button presented by the new secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, was erroneously labelled with the Russian word for 'overload'. To be sure, Obama retreated slightly on the missile defence plan, annoying the Poles, and he managed to conclude an agreement with Moscow to reduce nuclear stockpiles, called 'New Start', and Russia continued to provide logistical support to the US campaign in Afghanistan. But in general, relations were bad. The Russian elite generally saw Obama's 'reset' not as a genuine attempt at rapprochement but as a tactical move by the West to buy time for its missile defence and other plans contrary to their interests.[16]

There was also a very important shift in Moscow's attitude towards the European Union. Initially, the Russians had seen Brussels as a partner in the management of Eurasia and a potential 'pole' to balance against the United States and the PRC. Increasingly, though, they viewed the Europeans not only as military 'vassals' of the United States through NATO, but as challengers in their own right. This was not a military fear, as defence spending on the continent was steadily declining, but a political one. The Russians were offended by the EU's—to them—breezy and arrogant assumption of normative and regulatory exclusivity. It was precisely the EU's 'normative' power—its package of democratic governance, rule of law, and market standards—which Moscow feared.

The EU's long-standing European Neighbourhood Policy, which sought to create a 'Wider Europe' with a 'ring of friends' around the EU, now took on a more sinister meaning. In May 2009, Russia looked on warily as the EU launched its Eastern Partnership, which was designed to bring Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Georgia, if not into the European Union, then into its broader orbit. While EU policymakers saw their Neighbourhood Policy as benign and beyond reproach, the Moscow elite interpreted it through a lens shaped by ideological competition and

historical trauma. The EU's 'rules-based' integration was incompatible with Moscow's sovereignty-centred authoritarianism. The 'Wider Europe' of Brussels and Moscow's 'Greater Europe' were on a collision course.[17]

What Russia took from all this history was both a sense of its own grandeur and a paranoid insecurity. On the one hand, Russia had been a major actor in Europe and the world for hundreds of years. It had invaded and intervened against its neighbours on multiple occasions, acting as an 'ordering' power in Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and (periodically, at least) East Asia and Africa as well. The idea that Russia should have a 'sphere of influence' in what it called its 'near abroad' was well established in Moscow and throughout the country. Moreover, Russia had always stood for something in the world, be it orthodoxy, autocracy, or communism.

On the other hand, Russia had also experienced painful moments of humiliation. The country had been repeatedly invaded by the Swedes, the French, the Germans, and (during its own civil war) by the Western allies. Although it had also been attacked by Japan and China, the main external threat had always come from Europe, which is why it was primarily preoccupied with its 'buffer' along its western border. Furthermore, the country had frequently shown itself vulnerable to internal disintegration, most traumatically in 1989–1991, when—after the collapse of the Soviet Union—Russia's western borders were pushed back close to where they had been in 1600. From this point of view, the collapse of the Soviet Union was, as Putin stated in 2005, 'the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century'. For this reason, many Russians believed that they needed a 'strong state' to prevent fragmentation and keep out enemies.[18]

In short, internationally, Russia's relationship with the West had long been characterised by hostility and misunderstanding, leavened by brief moments of cooperation. Likewise, its domestic politics had mostly been characterised by self-consciously anti-Western forms of autocracy, justified as essential to prevent internal fragmentation and partition by outside powers. Then the sudden loss of territory, population, and international status in 1989–1991 created a profound sense of bereavement, disorientation, and resentment. The question now was whether this history was to be Russia's future as well.

Russia approached the second decade of the twenty-first century with the conviction that it was, or should be, one of the global Great Powers. Historically, statehood and Great Powerness were combined in the concept of *Derzavnost* (literally, 'power status'), which linked the Russia of Peter the Great, via the Soviet Union, with that of Vladimir Putin. History itself was a big driver: Russia was and should be a Great Power because it had always been one. As Putin told the Munich Security Conference in 2007, 'Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy.' 'We are not going to change this tradition today,' he added, menacingly. A year later, Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov stressed his country's determination to 'occupy an appropriate place in world politics'.[19]

This is why the Russian leadership emphatically rejected President Obama's suggestion that their country was merely a 'regional power'. When asked about this, Putin insisted that 'there are certain issues which cannot be solved without Russia', such as 'nuclear security' and 'energy'. 'In that sense,' he continued, 'Russia is a world power.' It was also a permanent member of the UN Security Council with 'veto power, which means that a whole number of the key issues of the international agenda cannot be resolved without Russia'. Putin went on, however, to note Russia's economic weakness after the collapse of the Soviet Union, stating that he was neither 'exaggerating [Russia's] importance' nor 'trying to get some status of superpower', which he said would be too great and unnecessary a 'financial and economic burden' for the country. In other words, asserting Russia's Great Powerness was not a bid for world domination, but a claim to be exempted from being dominated by the global hegemon, the United States.[20]

There was a general assumption that Russia had to be a Great Power if it was to survive as a state and nation and fend off the related threats of internal fragmentation and external tutelage. The Eurasianist thinker Alexander Dugin, an influential figure in Russia, expressed an extreme version of this view in a speech in February 2012. Given in the context of popular protests against the Putin regime, he warned that 'the global American empire strives to bring all countries of the world under its control' through 'fifth columns' or direct military intervention. 'Their goal

is Russia,' Dugin continued. 'We are the last obstacle on their way to building a global evil empire.' He therefore warned against anything that 'weaken[ed] Russia and allow[ed]' it to fall 'under total external control'. This required the nation to be 'united and mobilised'. 'Russia will be great,' he predicted. 'Otherwise it will not exist at all.'[21]

This assertion of Russian Great Powerness was widely approved by the general population, including many younger people. It did not command universal assent, though. Nadezhda Arbatova, head of the department of European Political Studies at Moscow's Institute for World Economy and International Relations, summed up the contrary view when she wrote that the claim was 'the result of a reactionary ideology, a superiority-inferiority complex and phantom-imperial pain'. 'It [this reactionary ideology] defines', Arbatova continued, 'military-political empire as the only form that Russian statehood can take.' She lamented that 'Russia's equality with other great powers, and the balance of forces between Russia, China and the US, are seen as more important than multilateral cooperation'.[22]

Moscow's main preoccupation is what it regards as the failure of the 'collective West' to recognise Russia's Great Power status and its right to preserve a distinctive civilisation. In remarks to the Munich Security Conference in 2012, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov lamented the attempted '"incorporation" of Russia into the "expanded West" without taking into account the centuries-old traditions of the foreign policy independence of our country'. He claimed that 'competition in international relations is increasingly acquiring a civilizational dimension'. Likewise, when speaking of Western demands for the introduction of democracy to Russia, Vladimir Putin declared it 'erroneous and wrong to impose on other nations and peoples one's own standards and models'.[23]

It was not just representative government that the Russians repudiated, but Western values. The country now saw itself as a bulwark of conservatism and religion against homosexuality, feminism, pornography, and other forms of what it regarded as moral corruption. Here Putin's relationship with the Orthodox Church played a significant role. Bishop Tikhon Shevkunov, who excoriated the decadence of modernity in his best-selling 2012 book *Every-Day Saints and Other Stories*, was said to be

Putin's confessor. One of the reasons Putin was so hostile to same-sex relations was their demographic impact on a Russia whose population figures were in long-term decline. 'We have to care about birth rates,' he warned. 'We have to reinforce families.'[24]

Russia, in fact, rejected the whole liberal international order with its assumption that economic prosperity and 'global governance' would inevitably envelop all parts of the world and render the classic Great Power system redundant. 'When everybody was still a mindless advocate of globalization making noise about a flat world without borders,' Putin's confidant Vladislav Surkov remarked in November 2019, 'Moscow clearly reminded [everybody] that sovereignty and national interests all have meaning.' Putin insisted on the 'inability of the Russian people to exist without sovereignty, to exist outside its own sovereign country'. 'There is no intermediate state,' the Russian leader argued. 'Either a country is sovereign, or it is a colony, no matter what the colonies are called.'[25]

The Russian dictator also felt vulnerable at home. To be sure, his activist foreign policy was an important part of his domestic legitimacy, but polling showed that only a quarter of Russians actually believed their country to be a Great Power. There were widespread protests over rigged elections in 2011–2012, which the Kremlin believed to be manipulated from outside. By the beginning of 2014, Putin's approval rating had fallen to the lowest levels since the turn of the millennium; the peak of 2008 after the drubbing of Georgia was a distant memory.[26]

Globally, Russia saw its vision of a multipolar world, in which developmental diversity among the Great Powers was respected, under threat. It rejected, as Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov put it, the idea of a Western 'master standard', and insisted on a variety of ways of understanding and attaining social harmony. Russia's National Security Strategy of 2015 stressed the importance of 'consolidating the Russian Federation's status as a leading world power… in a polycentric world'.[27]

Russia also felt embattled regionally. The main threat lay in Europe. In part, this came from the steady eastward advance of NATO, which now formed part of Russia's repertoire of grievances. Moscow's principal concern, though, was the more insidious challenge of the European Union. The Kremlin had given up all hope of establishing a 'Greater Europe', led

by the EU and the Russian Federation, and capable of balancing Washington and Beijing. Given its economic backwardness and political repressiveness, Moscow could expect only a peripheral role in a system centred on Brussels, and with a value system which was then not identical to but cognate with that of the United States and the wider West.[28]

The place where the ordering claims of Russia and the European Union clashed was Ukraine. That former Soviet republic had led a chequered political life since the Orange Revolution of 2005, but majority opinion was strongly in favour of integration with the West and embrace of the European Union—though not, at this stage, NATO. Brussels, which was concerned about levels of corruption and political repression in Ukraine, was slow to move, but by 2012 an Association Agreement was in the cards. This would probably be the first step towards Kiev's full membership in the European Union.

Moscow observed these developments with alarm. Closer economic links between Ukraine and the EU inevitably meant greater economic distance between Russia and Ukraine, which was Russia's largest trading partner until 2012. There was also concern that if Ukraine, which was on roughly the same economic level as Poland at the fall of communism, could emulate its Western neighbour, then many Russians might be tempted to follow suit and seek membership in the EU themselves. 'Ukraine chose the European way [path],' the Russian liberal Boris Nemtsov remarked, 'which applies the rule of law, democracy and change of power. Ukraine's success on this way is a direct threat to Putin's power because he chose the opposite course—a lifetime in power, filled with arbitrariness and corruption.' Ukraine was fast becoming an 'anti-Russia'. As Alexander Dugin prophetically put it, 'The battle for the integration of the post-Soviet space is a battle for Kiev.' One way or the other, as the year 2013 drew to a close, a showdown between Brussels and Moscow over Ukraine loomed.[29]

Russia also took a keen interest in a number of other areas. The Arctic featured strongly in Putin's thinking, partly because of its natural resources, and partly because the melting ice opened up new trading routes along Russia's northern coast, but mainly for strategic reasons. He noted that American and Russian missiles were targeted across the Arctic, making it a space of 'great strategic importance' for the defence of Russia. Russia now

invested heavily in the military infrastructure of the region, reopening Soviet-era bases and building new ones to reinforce its presence. The Balkans were of lesser importance, but still significant. Here Russia worried about the potential accession of its favoured partner Serbia to the European Union, supported Republika Srpska against the central government of Bosnia in Sarajevo, and opposed Bosnia joining NATO.[30]

The Russians were also very preoccupied with their southern flank. In the Caucasus, Moscow sought to suppress Islamist terrorism, or at least to prevent it from spilling over into Russia. The Kremlin was determined to stop foreign powers from using the disintegrative tendencies in the region—especially in Chechnya—to unravel the entire Russian Federation. It backed Armenia against the ever more confident and powerful Azerbaijan. Russia maintained an equally strong position in all five Central Asian Republics, and for similar reasons. Here there were no 'frozen conflicts' to manipulate. Instead, the Kremlin supported local strongmen against liberalising forces which might take the region out of the Russian orbit. It was relatively unworried by the spread of Chinese economic influence in the region. In power-political terms, the near enemy in the Caucasus and Central Asia was Turkey, the far enemy, the United States. Russia regarded both areas as its sphere of influence, in which it would tolerate economic but not geopolitical competitors.[31]

Moscow was much less concerned about the situation in Russia's Far East and in East Asia generally. To be sure, it was uneasy about the exponential growth of Chinese economic power and what that might mean for Russia's impoverished Far Eastern territories. There were still nagging fears that Chinese wealth might suborn the impoverished provinces on the Sino-Russian border, or that Beijing might want to revisit the 'unjust treaties'. When Putin himself had wondered aloud, during a visit to the border town of Blagoveshchensk at the turn of the millennium, what language its future inhabitants would speak, everybody knew that the only two possibilities were Russian and Chinese.[32]

Generally, though, the Kremlin was happy to accept China as an equal. 'No doubt about it,' Putin stated in 2015, 'It's a world power.' Moscow looked at the region through the lens of global Sino-Russian hostility towards the West. 'Objectively speaking,' Russia's ambassador to the PRC

observed in 2009, ‘China is one of the few genuinely strategic partners our country has.’ In September 2010, for example, the two powers proposed a multipolar Asian order. Moscow’s main strategic aims in the region, in fact, were to hold on to the southern Kuril Islands, which were claimed by Japan as its ‘Northern Territories’; to prevent its friendship with India from interfering with its growing closeness to India’s bitter rival China; and to ensure that its rogue ally North Korea did not plunge the region, or the world, into nuclear war. One way or the other, so long as the connection to Beijing was maintained, Russia did not need to fear the kind of encirclement that had haunted its leaders in the past.[33]

Russia responded to these challenges with a two-pronged strategy. The first was to intensify the relationship with China. In practical terms, this collaboration was most visible in the energy field, where Russian supply could meet the burgeoning Chinese demand. The real shift, though, was conceptual. Moscow and Beijing asserted their belief that the Western ‘rules-based’ order should give way to a Great Power system which recognised their interests as global ‘poles’. The purpose of the exercise, from the Russian point of view, was to engage the EU, and ultimately the United States. Andrey Kortunov, director general of the Russian International Affairs Council, summed up this view, writing, ‘Paradoxically, the only realistic path for a Russian return to Europe today is via Asia. In other words, if Russia cannot effectuate a return to Europe—on acceptable terms—on its own, then it may only be through the creation, jointly with China, India and other Asia partners, of a “Greater Eurasia” that Russia can acquire the expanded negotiating positions and potential it would need for its eventual dialogue with Brussels.’[34]

The second prong of Russia’s strategy was to seek a global agreement with the wider West which returned to the principles of the Helsinki Accords. As Moscow understood it, that settlement, and the Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe it established, rested on a recognition of equality between the Soviet Union and the United States and that the security of the continent was indivisible. It looked to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, rather than NATO or the EU, as the main guarantor of stability.

In this spirit, in 2010, as the fortieth anniversary of the Helsinki Accords approached, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov called for a return to the principles of the Helsinki process which would deliver on its unfulfilled promise of what he called a 'European architecture that would bring together all states of the Euro-Atlantic space without exception in one organization based on coherent, legally binding principles and with the appropriate tools to ensure them in practice'. Three years later, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2014, he welcomed moves towards a 'Helsinki Plus' as 'a serious attempt to rethink complicated processes in the European space, to move away from bloc schemes to find joint answers to common challenges'. What Russia sought, therefore, was not global dominance but recognition of Great Power parity with the United States.[35]

Putin sought to achieve this by re-creating not the Soviet Union itself, as is often claimed, but a Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet space. This would both serve as a buffer to shield Russia itself from attack and provide Moscow with the critical mass to compete with Washington, Beijing, and Brussels. The first step towards this new 'Eurasian Union', as Putin called it, was the establishment of a Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as outlined by the Russian leader in 2011. He envisaged a common economic space—a common market and customs union. The reference to 'common visa and migration policies' and to 'adapting the experience of the Schengen Agreement' showed the extent to which the EU served as a model.[36]

The idea, as Putin put it, was to create a 'powerful supranational organization capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region'. He called for a continental bloc made up of the EU and the EEU which would 'prompt changes in the geo-political and geo-economic setup on the continent as a whole with a guaranteed global effect'. This bloc would then 'engage in a constructive dialogue' leading to 'cooperation with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, North America and other regions'. In other words, the ultimate plan was to acquire sufficient economic heft to engage with the United States.[37]

In 2013, this strategy hit an obstacle in Ukraine. The issue here was not NATO membership, which was not in the cards, but the country's imminent participation in an Association Agreement with the EU. This meant ruling out Ukraine's membership in the Eurasian Economic Union, which the Kremlin deemed essential, and accepting its incorporation into a rival ordering system. Matters came to a head in late 2013 when Putin forced Ukraine's president, Viktor Yanukovich, to repudiate the Association Agreement, which enjoyed overwhelming popular support among Ukrainians. It became clear that the maintenance of Russia's sovereignty, as the Kremlin understood it, required destroying that of its neighbours.

When a popular revolt by EU-flag-waving Ukrainian demonstrators forced Yanukovich out, Russia intervened directly. In March 2014, Russian forces, at first covertly and then openly, moved into Crimea. The territory was annexed shortly after on the basis of a hastily organised and rigged referendum. Russia then instigated a rebellion in Eastern Ukraine. When this ran into difficulties, Russia sent troops to the Donbas, starting a war which continues to this day. The European Union and the United States responded with a limited range of sanctions, mainly on individuals. Energy was exempted, and there was no boycott of the subsequent World Cup, which was to be held in Russia. Meanwhile, the annexation triggered a surge in Putin's approval ratings, often dubbed the 'Crimea Consensus', which shored up his personal legitimacy and that of the regime. The Kremlin had got away with it, for now.[38]

Putin also sought to increase his global leverage through a series of interventions. In late 2015, he sent Russian aircraft and special forces to support the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, his long-term ally. This move, which tipped the scales against the rebels, strengthened Russia's prestige and caused consternation in the West, which was already wrestling with the flow of migrants from the region. Locally, the operation served to prop up Assad and to secure Russia's Mediterranean base at Tartus. Regionally, Moscow—which regarded Syria and the Caucasus as a single battle-space—hoped to disrupt Islamist networks before they could strike northwards. Putin now positioned himself as a diplomatic power broker in the region, and together with Iran and Turkey managed the negotiations between the Syrian factions at Astana, the capital of Kazakhstan. More

broadly, the aim was to demonstrate Russia's Great Power reach and its dependability as an ally, and thus to gain leverage against the West that could be parlayed for gains in Europe. Moscow had launched its first military intervention outside the post-Soviet space, signaling its willingness to project power globally.[39]

Moscow's intervention in Africa was driven by similar considerations. Here the instrument was not Russian regular forces but private military contractors with close links to the Kremlin. In 2017, the Wagner Group became involved in the civil war in Sudan, and a year later in Libya, where it supported the warlord Khalifa Haftar. In due course, the Russian presence would spread across much of the northern half of the continent, especially to Mali, Niger, Chad, and the Central African Republic. Building on the Soviet legacy, Moscow framed these activities as a liberation of the continent from the continued influence of its old colonial oppressors.

Russia used Africa to demonstrate its Great Power capabilities. It acted in pursuit of multipolarity rather than multilateralism, seeking to sideline the United Nations in Sudan and edging the regional Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) out of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Besides the rules-based liberal order, the greatest casualty of Russia's African adventures was France, which steadily lost ground in what had previously been its undisputed sphere of influence. As in the Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean, where the two powers also clashed, Moscow's aim was to exert leverage which could be used to bargain with France in Europe. But it also sought resource concessions, arms sales, and diplomatic support at the United Nations.

If Russia intervened militarily and cast itself as a decoloniser in Africa, it also insinuated itself into the Western democracies, but in a more covert way, claiming the mantle of defender of Christian, nationalist, and conservative values. In remarks made in September 2013, on the eve of the Ukraine crisis, Putin called for Russian 'spiritual, cultural and national self-determination', which included all the principal faiths, such as Orthodoxy, Islam, and Buddhism. He criticised the 'many Euro Atlantic countries' which were 'rejecting their roots, including the Christian values that constitute the basis of western civilisation'. Putin then went on to castigate 'the excesses of political correctness' with its same-sex marriages and

determination ‘to aggressively export this model all over the world’. The Kremlin saw the defence of ‘traditional’ values as a lever it could use to widen existing cultural fissures in Western societies on both sides of the Atlantic.[40]

Building on old KGB traditions from the Cold War, Russia now sought to influence Western domestic politics through a combination of social media manipulation, cash transfers, and propaganda broadcasts. The Internet Research Agency (IRA) in Saint Petersburg played a central role in this strategy, producing divisive content. Its goal was less about promoting a specific candidate or cause than about eroding public trust in democratic institutions and sowing discord. In 2014, the Kremlin supported the attempt to break up the United Kingdom during the Scottish ‘Independence Referendum’; the Scottish National Party leader, Alex Salmond, later took a post with the Kremlin’s mouthpiece television station Russia Today (RT). In 2016, when Britain voted on whether to stay in the European Union, Russia backed some elements of the ‘leave’ campaign in the hope of fracturing the Western front. Later that same year, Moscow also interfered in the US presidential election, and in 2017 it provided the Far Right Party of Marine Le Pen with loans to contest the French presidency.[41]

On other occasions, Russia cast itself as a bulwark against Western domination, finding an echo among many on the far left, and even parts of the mainstream left, in European societies. This led to some strange bedfellows. When the Kremlin recruited ‘independent observers’ to validate its rigged referendum in Crimea in March 2014, these included not only members of an extreme-right Catalan anti-independence party (Platform for Catalonia, which later united with the far-right Spanish party Vox) and the Hungarian far-right group Jobbik, but also figures from the Communist Party of Greece, the leftist German Die Linke, and the Polish Democratic Left Alliance.

Russia increasingly also appealed to the ‘Global South’ as it fell out with the West. In one of his philippics, Foreign Minister Lavrov noted with satisfaction not merely the growing ‘economic and political influence of the states of the Asia-Pacific region’ but also the ‘relative narrowing of the influence and capabilities of countries that are commonly attributed to the historical west’. Russia, he argued in December 2014, was accelerating the

move towards ‘a new, more democratic and fair polycentric world order’. Russia, like China, was, in the jargon of the time, both ‘subaltern’ and ‘imperial’.[42]

Perhaps the most important audience, though, was the domestic one. To be sure, Putin put a lot of effort into physical repression. He cracked down hard on the popular protests against the rigged elections in 2011–2012, and from then on the pressure on his critics never slackened. Putin was also behind the murder of the opposition leader Boris Nemtsov in February 2015 as well as many other killings. But the regime was equally—if not more—worried about deviant understandings of the past, especially of the Great Patriotic War, on which so much of Russia’s claim to Great Power status rested. From 2014, Russia’s military doctrine categorised ‘subversive information activities… aimed at undermining historical, spiritual and patriotic traditions related to the defence of the motherland’ as a ‘main military risk’. Putin himself repeatedly intervened in debates about the past, including the Second World War (which was, of course, a Soviet rather than just a Russian memory).[43]

By the start of the 2020s, Putin had chalked up a number of remarkable successes. He had hacked off a sizeable chunk of a sovereign European state and received little more than a slap on the wrist from the international community. Far from reducing its exposure, Europe was actually deepening its dependence on Russian energy as the Nord Stream II project neared completion. The manipulation of European publics was also paying off, with ever larger segments of the populations in France, Germany, and other countries receptive to Russian narratives. In Viktor Orban’s Hungary, there was even an EU government openly sympathetic to the Kremlin which acted as a spoiler, diluting or delaying EU sanctions.

Globally, Russia was riding high. Its relationship with the PRC was becoming steadily closer, with expanded energy exports, coordinated positions at the United Nations Security Council, and joint military exercises. Russian messaging was also getting through in the United States, at least at both extremes, as witnessed by the fawning interviews of the radical film-maker Oliver Stone with Putin, and the increasingly Russophile broadcasts of the controversial broadcaster Tucker Carlson. Larry Jacobs, the managing director of the conservative World Congress of Families,

remarked that ‘the Russians might be the Christian saviours of the world’. Russian-sponsored private military companies were rampaging across West Africa. The first Russia-Africa summit, in Sochi in 2019, was notably well attended, and it brought pledges of arms deals, debt forgiveness, and energy cooperation, all of which underlined Moscow’s determination to revive Soviet-era ties on the continent. The modernised Russian regular army seemed a formidable force, having recently shown its teeth in Syria. If Russia had long appeared a power in decline, that was no longer the case.[44]

But there were also some clouds on the horizon. The first presidency of Donald Trump had not brought the hoped-for relief. While the president himself had appeared to fraternise openly with Putin, his administration had sent the first lethal aid to Ukraine, toughened sanctions on Russia, held up the construction of the Nord Stream II gas pipeline to Germany, withdrawn from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF) and the Open Skies nuclear agreements in retaliation for Russian non-compliance, and conducted the largest ever diplomatic expulsion in history, after Russian intelligence operatives tried to kill a Russian exile in the cathedral town of Salisbury in England through poisoning and accidentally killed an innocent passerby instead.

Although Trump’s successor, Joe Biden, was rhetorically hostile to Russia, he did waive certain sanctions on Nord Stream as a gesture of friendship to Germany. Moscow’s anxieties about NATO had not abated. On the contrary, Putin’s annexation of Crimea had provoked the alliance into military deployments in Poland, Romania, and the Baltic states to deter further aggression. Worse, NATO members had committed themselves to higher defence spending under pressure from Donald Trump, and some had actually delivered on their promises.

Moreover, Russia’s relationship with the European Union had deteriorated badly, primarily because of the annexation of Crimea, but also because their ordering ambitions were incompatible with each other. Between 2014 and 2021, in fact, Ukraine implemented part of the Association Agreement with Brussels, deepened trade ties, and secured visa-free travel for Ukrainian citizens, making Western alignment increasingly irreversible. Lavrov claimed that the EU was involved in the ‘seiz[ure of] geopolitical space’ at Russia’s expense, launching ‘a coup

d'état in Ukraine'. 'It seems', he continued, 'that we somehow overestimated the independent role of the Europeans on the global arena,' as they demonstrated 'a high degree of dependence' on Washington. From Russia's point of view, the EU was not a bulwark against the 'Anglo-Saxons' but their handmaiden.[45]

There were also warning signs closer to home. The mass protests in Belarus in 2020 failed to topple its dictatorial president, Alexander Lukashenko, a close ally of the Kremlin, but they were a reminder of the dangers that still lurked. So were the protests at home against the imprisonment of the Russian dissident Alexei Navalny. Over three months at the start of 2021, more than six hundred thousand people came out on the streets in hundreds of Russian cities, and more than thirteen thousand were arrested. In January 2022, unrest in neighbouring Kazakhstan prompted Putin to send forces there to restore order.[46]

The main issue, though, was Ukraine. Despite considerable investment of blood and treasure, Russia and its local allies had been unable to secure the entire Donetsk region. They had also been unable to dominate the rest of the country, which was gravitating rapidly towards the Western orbit. Ukrainian opinion, much of which had been quite pro-Russian before 2013, and prepared to entertain the idea of joining the Eurasian Economic Union, shifted decisively against Moscow between 2014 and 2021. Hardly anyone was now willing to countenance economic integration with Russia; the majority wanted to join the EU. On taking office in 2019, President Volodymyr Zelensky announced that Ukraine in the EU would be 'the death of the Russian imperial project'.[47]

Putin no longer regarded this just as a security issue, but as an affront to the pride and nationhood of Russia. He had regarded all governments in Kiev since 2014 as illegitimate. Now he pronounced Ukrainian nationhood itself null and void. In July 2021, Putin penned an extraordinary essay, 'On the Historical Unity of Russians and Ukrainians', in which he declared that he would not let Ukraine become an 'anti-Russia'. 'We are one people,' he asserted, claiming that the 'true sovereignty of Ukraine is possible only in partnership with Russia'. That autumn, he began a massive military buildup on the Ukrainian border. In December 2021, Russia issued an ultimatum demanding not only guarantees of no further NATO expansion but also the

withdrawal of all alliance forces from states which had joined since 1997, which would have left the Baltic states completely exposed.

As Sir Laurie Bristow, who knew the Russian leader well from his time as UK ambassador to Moscow, remarked, all this showed the tightness of 'the link in Putin's mind between Russia's security and stopping Ukraine from becoming a democratic, western-facing country'. In the Kremlin's view, Bristow continued, 'only great powers [that is, the United States, Russia, and the People's Republic of China] have full sovereignty. Lesser powers have limited or compromised sovereignty.' For Russia, the question of Ukraine was simply a Great Power issue that was to be resolved between itself and the United States.[48]

If Putin's motivation for attacking Ukraine is well known, there is less clarity about the reason for the timing. It is possible that he was encouraged by the precipitate American withdrawal from Afghanistan, which suggested a lack of appetite for foreign engagement. It is also likely that the Kremlin believed Washington to be distracted by its increasing focus on the challenge from the PRC. Be that as it may, in early 2022, after NATO rejected his ultimatum, Putin took the fateful step. He met with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Beijing, proclaiming a 'partnership without limits'. Then, in late February, Putin launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. He planned to destroy the sovereignty of Ukraine in order to preserve, as he saw it, the sovereignty of Russia. The attack was thus, subjectively, a colonising and decolonising exercise.

The scale and brutality of the Russian assault took many by surprise. Putin attempted a decapitation strike on Kiev. His forces engaged in widespread destruction of civilian infrastructure and massacres, most notoriously at Bucha. Tens of thousands of Ukrainian children were kidnapped, to be raised as Russians. Shortly after the invasion began, the International Court in the Hague began to investigate Russia. The attack was also accompanied by a demand for the erasure of Ukrainian national identity. 'Ukraine tried to build up its sovereignty through the rejection of its own history,' Lavrov asserted in June 2022. 'Ukraine has no history of its own without the Russian nation.'[49]

Contrary to Russian expectations, Ukraine did not collapse quickly, and resistance even among the Russian speakers of the southern and eastern

parts of the country was bitter. Despite Putin's hints that he might use nuclear weapons should the West support Ukraine, NATO countries sent extensive military aid and the EU imposed punitive sanctions. The invasion soon ground to a halt, and in the autumn of 2022, the Russians were forced to retreat from large swathes of land, including the key city of Kherson. These victories were enabled by high morale and significant operational skills among Ukrainian forces as well as Western intelligence sharing and Western equipment, such as the US-supplied HIMARS precision artillery systems.

The years 2022–2023, in fact, saw a veritable crisis of Russian power. There was no economic collapse, but the sanctions caused severe economic pain and shortages of critical technologies. About a million Russians, mostly young and highly educated, fled the country. In late June 2023, the Russian mercenary commander Yevgeny Prigozhin, outraged by the failure of the military leadership to support his efforts at the front adequately, launched an abortive coup attempt. His troops advanced on Moscow more or less unopposed before Prigozhin lost his nerve and halted them; he was assassinated shortly afterwards. A month later, Russia's diminished global standing was reflected in the poor attendance at the second Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg; fewer than half of those countries represented at the inaugural meeting four years previously turned up on this occasion. This was not only a diplomatic embarrassment but also signalled that Russia's anti-Western messaging was losing traction in parts of the Global South. There was considerable doubt as to whether Russia was still a Great Power.[50]

Indeed, during the first eighteen months of the war, some in the West, Ukraine, and Russia itself even began to discuss the possible disintegration of the Russian Federation. In January 2023, Nikolai Patrushev, the former head of the intelligence service FSB and long-standing secretary of Russia's Security Council, warned that 'the Westerners seek to weaken our country, to dismember it, to destroy the Russian language and the Russian world. They have long since perfected the technology of undermining their adversaries from within and fragmenting them into small states.'[51]

Russia thus saw the war as a struggle against the overbearing power of the West. Sergey Kiriyenko, whom Putin appointed to administer the

occupied parts of Ukraine, claimed that ‘Russia is not at war with Ukraine today—rather the United West is waging war against us on the territory of Ukraine’. Likewise, the senior Russian political scientist Sergey Karaganov described the conflict as a ‘kind of proxy war between the West and the rest—Russia being, as it has been in history, the pinnacle of the “rest”—for a future world order’. Putin himself spoke of a confrontation with ‘the Kyiv authorities and their real masters in the West’. Of course, framing the conflict in this way helped the Kremlin to justify the cost of the war and to rally nationalist sentiment and silence dissent.[52]

The Kremlin cast itself as, to quote Putin, the victim of a Western ‘neo-colonial system that allows it to parasitize, in fact, to plunder the world at the expense of the power of the dollar and technological dictates’. It extracted, he continued, ‘tribute from humanity,… the main source of unearned prosperity, the rent of the hegemon’. The aim of the West, Putin argued, was ‘total desovereignization’: ‘They… want to see us as a colony’, reduced to ‘a crowd of soulless slaves’. Likewise, the former Russian intelligence officer and university professor Andrei Bezrukov claimed, in 2022, ‘This is in essence a liberating special operation (against the US and Britain) for independence, it is anti-colonial.’[53]

If the Russians derided the ‘collective West’ in general, they entertained a particular loathing for the British and Americans, the ‘Anglo-Saxons’. Putin reminded the world of the ‘genocide of Indian tribes in America’, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and of the Anglo-American obliteration of German cities in World War II. Now, he claimed, the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ were targeting Russia. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov took the ‘Anglo-Saxon nuclear project’ of AUKUS to task for violating the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Patrushev accused the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ of ‘obsessively’ trying to discredit the institutions of multipolar governance such as the United Nations, the UN Security Council, and the BRICS.[54]

These words were also intended to win over the ‘Global South’. Putin stated that he was ‘proud that in the 20th century it was our country that led the anti-colonial movement’. At the Moscow Conference on International Security in August 2023, the Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, talked up the new ‘role of countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America in the world system’, framing the attack on Ukraine as an ‘act of resistance

against modern colonialism'. At the same event, Lavrov hailed the 'gradual de-dollarisation of the global economy' as part of a move towards a 'truly democratic world order'.[55]

Shortly afterwards, Lavrov lambasted the 'collective West' on the eve of the BRICS summit in South Africa for its 'colonialist and racist manners' and its 'exploitation of the World Majority to maintain the well-being of the "golden billion"'. He also noted that the cumulative GDP of the BRICS countries accounted for about 30 percent of global GDP, which was higher than that of the G7, at least according to the metric of purchasing power parity. The Eurasianist Alexander Dugin even hailed the BRICS summit as 'the birthday of the multipolar world'.[56]

Russia's attempt to win over the 'global majority' was aided by the Hamas attack on Israel in early October 2023 and Western support for the lethal Israeli response. In the course of late 2023 and 2024, the Kremlin began to claw back a lot of the lost ground in a world outraged by the killing of tens of thousands of civilians in Gaza, the plight of the remaining Palestinian population there, and perceived Western double standards. Russian warships made port calls across the world, and Putin, who was under indictment by the International Criminal Court, visited not only North Korea but also Vietnam. Russian propagandists skillfully appealed to the Soviet legacy in the 'Global South'. By the end of 2024, Moscow had largely recovered its position there.[57]

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine itself continued with fluctuating fortunes. In the summer of 2023, a large-scale Ukrainian offensive failed to break through Russian lines. Both sides settled down to a war of attrition, with the occasional dramatic initiative. In August 2024, the Ukrainians occupied a substantial chunk of the Russian province of Kursk, undermining the Kremlin's claim to defend the homeland and demonstrating Kiev's capacity for offensive operations despite the stalemate. Shortly afterwards, Putin deployed thousands of North Korean troops sent by his ally Kim Jong Un. Slowly the tide turned in the Kremlin's favour. As of late 2024, the Russians not only held about 20 percent of Ukraine but had returned to the offensive.

Meanwhile, Moscow had found ways of mitigating Western sanctions. It used shadow tanker fleets, currency manipulation, and parallel import

networks to get around the restrictions. There were many ready takers in the Global South. India, in particular, profited from the supply of Russian oil at discounted prices. All this meant that while Moscow lost revenue, it maintained an income stream to support the regime's domestic programmes and its military spending in Ukraine.

In early 2025, Russia's Great Power position was still in the balance. The decisive and unexpected Azerbaijani victory over Russia's old ally Armenia undermined its position in the Southern Caucasus. In Syria, the Assad regime unexpectedly collapsed in December 2024, leading to a humiliating Russian withdrawal from that country after a nearly ten-year deployment. The naval base at Tartus and a nearby air base were abandoned. If the Kremlin had long presented itself as a more reliable partner than the fickle United States and other Western powers, its standing in the region had taken a heavy knock. Russia's capacity to play a Great Power role in the Middle East was further reduced in June 2025, when its ally Iran suffered heavy blows to its proxy forces in Palestine and Lebanon, and even a direct attack by Israel and the United States on its nuclear weapons programme.

These losses appeared to be more than outweighed by the inauguration of Donald Trump for his second term as president in January 2025. Within a few weeks, his defence secretary signalled that Ukraine could not expect to recover its borders of 2014, his vice president berated the Europeans for insufficient commitment to democracy, and the president himself excoriated the Ukrainian president in the Oval Office on live television. The United States even briefly suspended the supply of intelligence to Ukraine. Breaking with the Western consensus, Trump also opened direct discussions with Putin over Ukraine, and his officials met their Russian counterparts at Saudi Arabia without the Ukrainians or the Europeans being present. On the face of it, Washington had accepted Moscow's demand that the whole matter should be settled through a Great Power deal.

Russia's claim to Great Power status rests almost entirely on its military potential. In the year before it launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia was the world's fifth highest defence spender, in dollar terms, behind the United States, China, India, and the United Kingdom. Thanks to

its huge legacy holdings of weaponry from the Soviet era, and the local purchasing power of the ruble, this made the Russian armed forces fearsome in terms of mass and firepower, which is second only to that of the United States. Moscow can boast thousands of tanks and aircraft and hundreds of ships and submarines. Thanks to the war in Ukraine, Russian armed forces have extensive combat experience, particularly in large-scale combined arms operations, though how useful this will be against Western militaries with strong air forces is not clear.

In manpower terms, Russia's peacetime army was the fourth largest after China, India, and the United States, and increases during the Ukraine war will probably bring it up to second place. Though there have been considerable losses in Ukraine—perhaps one hundred thousand dead and significant damage to the Black Sea fleet—important parts of the armed services, such as the Northern Fleet, have remained completely unscathed. Moreover, Russia also possesses significant 'niche' capabilities in the undersea and space domains, enabling it to disrupt satellites in orbit and communications cables and energy infrastructure across the world.

Despite this, given the continuing war in Ukraine, it is an open question whether Russia can sustain this posture. If equipment losses were to rise substantially, Russia would struggle to replace them. The same is true for personnel. Indeed, Putin's partial mobilisation of 2022 was a failure. Russia has been so short of manpower that it has had to rely not merely on private military companies, but on forces like the Chechens and North Koreans, to mount offensive operations. The invasion exposed deep systemic problems within the Russian military, such as low morale, poor training, and inadequate logistics, which limited Moscow's ability to act effectively. Moreover, the Western sanctions on trade in advanced electronics and precision manufacturing make it difficult for Russia to replenish modern weapons systems.[58]

Where Russia is indisputably a Great Power, perhaps even the greatest power, is in respect to nuclear weapons. It commands the largest arsenal in the world, which at nearly six thousand warheads is larger than that of the United States. Thanks to its multiple launching systems on land, at sea, and in the air, Russia also has a formidable 'second-strike' capacity. It is the only power capable of destroying the United States in thirty minutes, and it

is guaranteed to be able to do so even if it is attacked first. Though this capability did not deter NATO from expanding eastwards against Russia's wishes, it did constrain Western willingness to help Ukraine.

In economic terms, Russia is not among the world's great players, which is why some observers do not consider it a Great Power at all. In 2023, it was ranked eighth in terms of GDP and sixth in terms of the PPP metric. Moreover, while international sanctions after the attacks on Ukraine have not brought down the Russian economy, they have severely weakened it and greatly increased the country's dependence on China. The only sector in which Russia is an economic superpower is energy, with a huge mix of coal, nuclear, and especially oil and gas reserves. Energy exports—or the reverse, the threat of cutting off energy supplies—have long been important instruments of Russian Great Power politics. Given the high global energy prices, and the failure of the sanctions to prevent massive Russian gas sales to India and China, these factors have helped to keep the entire economy and war machine afloat.[59]

The key thing is that Russia is largely autarchic or could be. To be sure, it is at the moment heavily dependent on imports of advanced technology, machinery, and pharmaceuticals, but it could probably—with some effort—produce these at home just as it did during the Soviet period. More importantly, the country is completely self-sufficient not only in energy but also foodstuffs. It actually produces a surplus of grain, seafood, and vegetable oil. If it were completely cut off from the outside world, but reasonably managed, Russia would neither starve nor freeze. The only other Great Power that shares this characteristic is the United States.

Demographically, Russia has lost a lot of ground in recent years. Whereas the Soviet Union was the third largest country in the world by population, Russia now ranks number nine, between Bangladesh and Mexico. Of course, beyond a certain critical mass, population size itself is not a criterion for Great Powerness, but Russia has long relied on quantity over quality in the application of force. Moreover, the Russian population has been in long-term decline owing to low fertility, alcoholism, drug abuse, and general despair. The average age of a Russian in 2010 was only forty-six; in 2011, one expert referred to the 'Dying Bear'. Since then, the problem has only gotten worse, aggravated from 2022 by the outflow of

more than a million working-age Russians fleeing conscription or just seeking a better life. Some regions, especially Siberia and the Far East, have long been suffering from depopulation. This has profound strategic and economic implications, given the vulnerability of that part of Russia to Chinese economic and political penetration.[60]

Russia's Great Power reach is smaller than that of the Soviet Union in its heyday, but still very substantial. Moscow enjoys a large sphere of influence beyond its borders, expressed politically in an evolving alphabet soup of commonwealths, confederations, and unions, and militarily in a network of overseas bases, sometimes erected with the consent of the internationally recognised government and sometimes not. It also possesses a global reach, albeit a more limited one than either the United States today or the bygone Soviet Union. When President Obama dismissed Russia as merely a 'regional power', implying that it was no more significant than, say, Nigeria, he was thus somewhat wide of the mark.

Russia is especially dominant in Central Asia, where the larger republics were both members of the post-Soviet Commonwealth of Independent States and are now part of Putin's new Eurasian Economic Union. There are Russian military facilities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Despite this, these states are not just Russian clients. They refused, for example, to support the attack on Ukraine, emphasised its territorial integrity, and even permitted antiwar protests on their soil. In the Caucasus, the position is even more complex, given the failure of Russia to protect Armenia against Azerbaijan, but Russia is still by far the most important actor in the region. It has bases in Armenia and (without the permission of Georgia) in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

On its crucial western and eastern flanks, though, Russia does not enjoy a comparable buffer. To be sure, the Belarus of President Alexander Lukashenko is effectively a client state and allowed Russia to use the country as a staging ground to attack Ukraine. So is Transnistria, which Russia hacked out of Moldova, and which houses a major base. But in Ukraine and NATO, Moscow faces highly capable and now hostile or wary neighbours. In the east, Russia dominates Mongolia and has a close relationship with North Korea, but for the rest it faces the People's Republic of China, which is currently well disposed but has the capacity to threaten

Russia, and Japan, which is deeply suspicious on account of the disputed Northern Islands.

Russia's global reach is more limited. Its energy strength gives Moscow a certain heft, but the Russian economy is too weak to command much respect. In commercial terms, Russia is forced to accept a growing Chinese presence in Central Asia and other parts of the world. Nor does Moscow control any of the world's financial levers or geopolitical chokepoints. Militarily, Russia possesses the 'heavy lift' capability to deploy substantial forces by air, including private military companies working for the Kremlin, but its naval capacity is limited by the fact that its only aircraft carrier, the aged *Admiral Kuznetsov*, will probably never be fully operational again owing to technical problems.

There are two areas well beyond the borders of Russia where Moscow plays or attempts to play a Great Power role. One is the Middle East, where Russia's standing was high until the sudden collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024, and the subsequent evacuation of the two Russian bases there. The other, somewhat unexpectedly, is Africa, where—as we have seen—Russian influence has been steadily increasing, and now encompasses much of the northern half of the continent, and also parts of the southern half as well, notably South Africa itself.

What it lacks in military range, the Kremlin compensates for, at least to a certain extent, with 'hybrid power'. Russia has the proven capacity to disable, at least temporarily, the IT infrastructure of some states—for example, neighbouring Estonia. Moscow is also able to confuse societies and intervene in the electoral politics of larger Western states, although the extent of its involvement in changing the outcome of the Brexit referendum and the 2016 US presidential contest is unclear. In 2020–2021, during the COVID pandemic, Russia also achieved some global reach through the provision of its Sputnik vaccine to at least seventy countries, including India and Hungary, though this was limited by doubts about its effectiveness.

More than any other major actor today, Russia's Great Power reputation is based on military strength, but it does not rest on that alone. Moscow's influence in its 'near abroad' is buttressed by the idea of a *Russkiy Mir*

(Russian World), based partly on the presence of millions of Russians in those lands but extending beyond narrow ethnic categories. A long common history, together with a shared Russian high culture and respect for, if not belief in, Russian Orthodoxy, give Moscow a reach into many parts of the post-Soviet space. For this reason, the Kremlin's 2023 'Foreign Policy Concept' defines Russia as a 'unique country-civilization and vast Eurasian and Euro-Pacific power that brings together the Russian people and other peoples belonging to the cultural and civilizational community of the Russian world'.[61]

Over the past two decades, Russia has steadily built up its soft power. It funded cultural organisations such as the Russian World Foundation and Russia House, which are tasked with promoting 'Russianness' abroad in cities like Berlin. Moscow has handed out passports to Russians living in neighbouring countries, such as Georgia. It collaborates closely with the Russian Orthodox Church in advancing Russian state interests abroad. Russia uses regional organisations it dominates, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union, to promote the idea of *Russkiy Mir*. There is nothing 'soft', of course, about the uses to which this power is put. It is intended to prepare the way for the use of military force, not as an alternative to it. Observing this dynamic at play in Ukraine, the late Boris Nemtsov remarked in 2015 that 'the Kremlin uses minorities, language and cultural issues to blow up the neighbouring countries from the inside'.[62]

The 'Russian idea' also has traction beyond the immediate 'Russian World', not least thanks to the efforts the Kremlin has put into promoting it. The Valdai Discussion Club was founded in 2004 to influence foreign media, while the Russia Today network seeks not so much to defend the Kremlin as to sow doubt about the West. Moscow has also promoted its vision of Russia as an historic civilisation and Great Power at global sporting events, such as the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics and the 2018 World Cup.

In the West, Russia claims to stand for (particular interpretations of) Christianity, social conservatism, and 'sovereign democracy' against the pressures of globalisation. Globally, Russia is a standard-bearer of the 'rest' against the 'West'. It has had considerable success in both regards, finding

support on the American MAGA right, in the Alternative for Germany (AFD) and the French National Rally movement, and among governments like Viktor Orban's Hungary. At the same time, Russia's prestige is high among far-left groups such as Jean-Luc Mélenchon's La France Insoumise movement, Die Linke in Germany, and many others.

Russia's standing among what the Kremlin calls the 'Global Majority' is high. A report published in late May 2022, when the world was still in shock about Ukraine, showed positive views in India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria. This support reflects less Russia's energy heft than its appeal to the Cold War legacy of the Soviet Union's struggle against 'Western imperialism'. This plays particularly well in countries such as North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, and South Africa, but not just there. Every developing country with a grievance against the West—and that is almost every developing country—has a sneaking regard for Moscow.

There is no denying, though, that Russia's reputation has suffered serious damage as a result of its unprovoked attack on Ukraine and the atrocities perpetrated by its forces there. In Ukraine itself, Russian narratives largely misfired, despite massive investment in social media, broadcast propaganda, and other measures. More widely, Putin's naked aggression pushed Russia far down the various soft-power indexes. Even before the full-scale invasion in 2022, Russia's soft-power efforts struggled to connect with their intended audiences. Indeed, there has been significant blowback against the *Russkiy Mir* concept in Ukraine, Georgia, the Baltic states, and other countries that have been exposed to Russian aggression, leading to many Russian cultural organisations being shut down.[63]

Perhaps the biggest question surrounding Russia is its resilience. To be sure, the country has proven capable of absorbing enormous punishment and of recovering from adversity. It did so after the stunning Swedish victory at Narva in the time of Peter the Great, after the humiliating defeat in the Crimean War, after the initial German advance in 1941, and after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This reflects partly the hardiness of its people; partly the sheer size of the country, which enables it to trade space for time; and partly the fact that it has immense demographic, military, and raw material resources to fall back on. The current regime has also shown

itself resilient by enduring outside pressure, by shifting narratives, and by restructuring the economy under sanctions.

All the same, there is an undeniable brittleness about Russia, which has experienced state failure twice in the past 120 years or so. Tsarist Russia disintegrated in 1917, and so did the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. There have been moments recently when Russia itself seemed on the verge of fragmentation, first during the 1990s, then when Putin got bogged down in Ukraine. Very few Russians actively supported Prigozhin's attempted coup in the summer of 2023, but strikingly, very few people actively tried to stop him; he just lost his nerve. Autocratic states like Putin's Russia seem rock-solid, until they aren't. Nobody knows this better than the Russian leader himself. In 2013, ten years before Prigozhin, Putin spoke of 'the national catastrophes of the twentieth century when we twice experienced the collapse of our state'.[64]

The durability of Putin's regime depends heavily on whether his inner circle—the security chiefs, oligarchs, and technocrats—see him as indispensable or irreplaceable. The lack of a clear, legitimate successor could turn any health crisis (Putin turned seventy in October 2022), assassination, or political miscalculation into a systemic shock far greater than Prigozhin's mutiny. It is probable, though, that any successor to Putin will hold the same views on Russia's Great Power destiny.

Today Russia has fewer resources, less reach, and a poorer reputation than the Soviet Union did. Time will tell whether the Putin regime will prove more resilient, but the omens are not good. If Russia is still barely a Great Power, it is clearly losing ground. As Joe Biden said back in 2018, after his term as Obama's vice president and before being elected president, 'Look at the state of Russia now. They're in enormous decline. By any definition, these guys are on a toboggan run. The question is: when the run ends.'[65]

Twelve

The Persistence of the United Kingdom

THE GREAT POWER status of the United Kingdom has always been in doubt. In 1897, at what appeared the high point of the British Empire, the ‘bard of empire’, Rudyard Kipling, penned ‘Recessional’ to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. He warned that ‘far-called, our navies melt away’, and that soon the ‘pomp’ of the empire would be no more than the defunct civilisations of ‘Nineveh and Tyre’. A few years later, the secretary of state for the colonies, Joseph Chamberlain, lamented that ‘the weary Titan staggers under the too vast orb of his fate’. These voices swelled after the Second World War and the onset of decolonisation, and reached a crescendo immediately following the Brexit referendum in 2016. The critics had a point: Britain had indeed lost considerable ground since the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; much of its navy has melted away. Despite this, the United Kingdom is still acting as one of the few Great Powers today, as a mainstay of the Western alliance with global reach, as the first line of defence against Russia in the Baltic and High North, and as one of the world’s largest economies. It is the best example of how a country can compensate for loss of resource through reach, reputation, and resilience.[1]

Great Britain, and before that England, has been a major actor in European and then global politics for as long as anyone can remember. In the Middle Ages, English kings won and lost a realm in France. The British created another empire in North America, and when they lost that in the late eighteenth century, they seized yet another in Africa and Asia and other parts of the world. In the meantime, the British Isles became, albeit with a

lot of pushing and shoving, a single state. After conquering Wales in the Middle Ages, England united with Scotland to form Great Britain in 1707, and with Ireland to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland a century later. By then, most of the British Isles, with the significant exception of Ireland, had become Protestant. The Reformation, as Henry VIII famously claimed, enabled England to become ‘an Empire to itself’—in other words, not subject to the authority of the pope in Rome or any other outside power.

There was a close connection between union, empire, and Britain’s place in the world. Union was intended to end strife between and within the four nations of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland; to prevent foreign powers from exploiting these differences as a ‘backdoor’ to attack England; and to boost these economies in order to rally all energies for the protection of the Home Islands and the European balance of power. The resulting state—which located the common debt and the common defence in a common parliamentary representation at Westminster—created a structure uniquely suited to maximising the power of the British Isles in Europe and around the world. It facilitated customs alignment, created a British single market, pooled resources for overseas trade and expansion, and generally increased Britain’s commercial and naval capacity.

Likewise, the quest for overseas empire was primarily driven by geopolitics—to deny European rivals, such as Spain and France, the resources to attack Britain in Europe, and to secure these resources in support of London’s own European and global ambitions. There were some who thought the potential in America so great that they expected, as the Massachusetts colonist and later US president John Adams wrote in the mid-eighteenth century, that it would lead to the ‘transfer of the great seat of Empire into America’. At its greatest territorial extent in the early twentieth century, the British Empire encompassed about a quarter of the Earth’s landmass. It was present on every continent, and was—as the cliché had it—a realm on which ‘the sun never set’.[2]

Central to Britain’s Great Power role was the Royal Navy, which emerged as the strongest in Europe and then the world. Its principal task was the defence of the Home Islands, but it also maintained the European balance of power and underpinned England’s and then Britain’s commercial

supremacy. The seventeenth-century Navigation Acts reinforced this by laying down that any trade between another country and Britain or its colonies be carried either in that country's or British ships, while Britain itself dominated much of the carrying trade elsewhere. By the eighteenth century, Britain largely enjoyed command of the oceans. In the late nineteenth century, by which time Britain was completely dominant, the Naval Defence Act of 1889 stipulated that battleship numbers of the Royal Navy be equal to those of the next two rivals combined.[3]

There were substantial disagreements in Britain about the relative importance of Europe and the rest of the world. Most late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Whigs believed that the country was best defended through a policy of active intervention on the continent, supported by land forces, alliances, and subsidies. Most Tories, by contrast, held that Britain was an island nation which could be shielded primarily by the Royal Navy, saving the country the expense and trouble of mainland alliances and allowing it to concentrate on commercial and colonial expansion. This divide would be replicated in slightly different form over the following two centuries—for example, Prime Minister Lord Salisbury's late nineteenth-century idea of 'Splendid Isolation'. It endures to this day, in the shape of the distinction between 'Remainers' and 'Leavers' with respect to membership of the European Union, and those who prefer a 'Global Britain' over one more closely tied to the rest of the continent.[4]

Thanks to its sophisticated fiscal-military state apparatus, underpinned by a parliamentary system which guaranteed the national debt, Britain was able to fund continental wars and overseas expansion simultaneously. It repeatedly sent expeditionary forces to Europe, including the armies of Marlborough and Wellington, and subsidised multiple European coalitions, such as those against Louis XIV of France and Napoleon, in order to defend the European balance of power. The Royal Navy's command of the sea allowed Britain to project force, secure resources, interdict rivals, pursue gunboat diplomacy, and deliver public goods such as ending the international slave trade through the Pax Britannica. Britain's European role, empire, and global standing in turn boosted national identity and legitimised the Union, with the significant exception of much of Ireland.[5]

Britain’s central role in the world order until the mid-twentieth century, and its enduring role in the European balance, was reflected in all the major settlements of the past three hundred years. It was prominently represented at Utrecht in 1713, Vienna in 1815, Versailles in 1919, and Yalta and Potsdam in 1945. When the Second World War ended, British troops were present as victors and occupiers across much of the globe—in Germany, Scandinavia, the Low Countries, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and the Far East. In short, Britain has been historically one of the great ordering powers, both in Europe and globally.

Over time, Britain’s focus has expanded and contracted. Initially, the main concern was to secure the south coast of England from attack by defending the littoral of Northern France and the Low Countries. This required more involvement farther east in ever-widening concentric circles, so that eventually the security of the British Isles was deemed to be dependent on the balance of power in Europe as a whole. The European balance in turn was believed to be linked to the global balance, so that in the minds of Britain’s elites and much of the public, a policy of sustained engagement across the continents was seen as the key to their security. Rather than sheltering behind a specific ‘sphere of influence’, London regarded the entire world as its shield.

Of course, Britain did not do all this on its own. More than any other power, its foreign policy hinged on the astute choice and management of alliances. Nearly all of Britain’s wars were fought as coalitions; it is no accident that the only one that wasn’t, the American Revolutionary War, ended with the partition of the First British Empire. The key to this ability to marshal outside support was what we today call British ‘soft power’. Most countries, most of the time, wanted what Britain wanted, or at least they very much did not want what Britain’s enemies wanted. The best illustration of this is the fact that London was repeatedly able to assemble first European and then global coalitions against Louis XIV, Napoleon, Imperial Germany, and Hitler.

The most important alliance which Britain made was that with the United States. Initially, the relationship was fractious, and the two countries fought a war in 1812–1814. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, though, London decided to support American claims to dominate the Western Hemisphere, mainly to protect British trade interests there by

keeping out European rivals. For the first fifty years or so of its existence, for example, the Monroe Doctrine, under which the United States prohibited any new European colonisation or influence in the Western Hemisphere, was actually enforced by the Royal Navy. Meanwhile, Anglo-American soft-power connections across the Atlantic, based on common heritage, smoothed elite relations and reduced the risk of serious conflict. By the end of the nineteenth century, Britain and the United States saw the world if not in identical, then in broadly similar, terms.

On both sides of the Atlantic, and in the United States among figures like President Theodore Roosevelt, the idea of a common ‘Anglo-Saxon’ destiny took hold. This discourse championed parliamentary democracy, the free passage of commerce in peacetime, and the containment of external aggression, be it by ‘Slavs’, ‘Teutons’, or ‘Latins’. The belief that the Anglo-Americans ran the world was also shared widely in the world during the first half of the twentieth century, celebrated by some, accepted by most, and deplored and resisted by a smaller number of ‘challengers’.

Another British asset was the country’s role as a commercial and communications node. London was the world’s greatest financial centre for hundreds of years, and even after the rise of New York, it remained extremely important. Much of the world’s communications network was laid by the British or passed through British territory. This capability was backed up by the supremely powerful Royal Navy, which, as France and Germany learned to their cost, was able to blockade enemy ports, intimidate neutrals, and ensure that Britain could continue to draw upon the world’s resources. For much of the past three centuries, therefore, the British, and by the early twentieth century the Anglo-Americans, were thus able to ‘unplug’ rival powers from the global system.[6]

When the thirteen American colonies broke from London in the late eighteenth century, there were many, including King George III himself, who predicted that Britain’s status in Europe would be irreparably harmed. This did not happen. The departure of twenty-six counties of Ireland after the First World War to form the Irish Free State and later the Republic of Ireland hardly dented Britain’s global position. The loss of most of the overseas empire after the Second World War did much greater damage, but

did not end Britain's Great Power status. By the standards of the times, it was a Great Power before, during, and after the 'Age of Empire'.[7]

What changed was that Britain was no longer the greatest power. In the late 1940s, Britain handed over the baton to America in the Eastern Mediterranean, where Greece was facing communist subversion. In 1956 London was forced into inglorious retreat by Washington when it tried—together with France and Israel—to prevent Egypt's President Abdel Nasser from taking over the Suez Canal. By 1971, Britain had also largely withdrawn from 'east of Suez', including Malaysia and Singapore, the Maldives, Aden, and the Persian Gulf. 'Great Britain', former US Secretary of state Dean Acheson commented, 'had lost an empire and failed to find a role'. The British Labour Party leader, Hugh Gaitskell, summed up the prevailing view. He could see that 'a United States of Europe' would be a major actor. 'This great power, if it is to be a great power,' he said, 'must have a government. It must negotiate and act as one.' But Gaitskell warned that this would be 'the end of Britain as an independent nation' and thus 'the end of a thousand years of history'.[8]

Economically, the cost of the Second World War and the resulting welfare state, the expense of maintaining a world position, and the economic crisis of the 1960s, which culminated in a humiliating International Monetary Fund bailout a decade later, all took their toll. Plans for an ambitious new aircraft carrier fleet had to be abandoned in the late 1960s. Sterling lost ground as a reserve currency. 'Declinism' took wing and became a thriving cottage industry over the years. The title of a subsequent book about the period by distinguished British international historian David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled*, seemed to say it all.[9]

All the same, the United Kingdom remained a major actor, especially in Europe but also across much of the world. The British Army of the Rhine contributed substantially to the containment of the Soviet Union throughout the Cold War. By convention the NATO position of deputy allied supreme commander Europe was always held by a Briton. Thanks to the independent nuclear deterrent since 1952, with its ability to target Moscow, Britain was much less vulnerable to atomic blackmail, or fear of losing the American umbrella, than most other European states. Though the Royal Navy withdrew from Malta in 1979, Britain retained Gibraltar and significant

sovereign base areas in Cyprus. Some of what Britain now lacked in conventional military power was offset by the strength and reputation of its intelligence services, which Moscow feared far more than those of the United States. Despite its undoubted retreat, therefore, the United Kingdom was indisputably the strongest power on the continent after the Soviet Union and the United States.[10]

That said, Britain was now heavily reliant on American support—logistical, technological, and intelligence—to project force overseas. This was most clearly illustrated in the nuclear field. Britain cancelled its planned Blue Streak medium-range ballistic missile in 1960 in favour of the American Skybolt air-launched option. Two years later, London was deeply embarrassed when Washington cancelled that programme unilaterally. Shortly afterwards, the problem was solved by fitting US-built missiles with British warheads and deploying them on Royal Navy Polaris submarines. But the damage was done: Britain's nuclear deterrent might be independently targeted and operated, but it relied on US cooperation in the medium and long term. This caused many in Britain itself and around the world to question whether the country was truly an independent global actor.[11]

In 1973, after two unsuccessful attempts, Britain joined the European Community, partly in the hope of improving its economic situation and partly in order to embrace a new European destiny. Entering the Common Market meant breaking the preferential trading relationships with the former dominions, such as Australia and New Zealand, which was psychologically painful. To a majority of Britons, and especially the elite, this was a price worth paying in order to give the United Kingdom an economic and political co-ordering role in Europe to complement its military one through NATO. If the empire had been acquired to support Great Power status in Europe, it was jettisoned for the same reasons, as an economic, strategic, and moral liability.

The turn to Europe reduced Britain's global role but did not end it. In the South Atlantic, Britain retained St. Helena, Ascension Island, and the Falklands Islands, from which a British task force ejected an Argentine invasion force in 1982. In Asia, the British held on to Diego Garcia (leased to the Americans), a base at Brunei, Hong Kong (until 1997), and a floating

dock at Singapore. Though the floating dock itself has been turned into a commercial shipyard, London remains committed to the security, though not explicitly the ‘defence’, of Singapore under the Five Power Defence Arrangements with that country and Australia, New Zealand, and Malaysia and continues to have a limited presence there. The Royal Navy returned to the Persian Gulf in the 1980s when the ‘Armilla Patrol’ was dispatched to deal with the fallout from the Iran-Iraq War. This was a much-diminished global role compared to the heyday of empire, to be sure, but still an important one.

Remarkably, and almost uniquely, Britain effected a peaceful transition of power to the United States. Washington became the new Rome, with the new hegemon pursuing in most, though not all, respects the traditional aims of British foreign policy. Critics now dismissed London as merely a deputy or vassal, but the ‘special relationship’ is better understood as a symbiosis. ‘The wartime habit of intimate, informal collaboration’, former US National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger argued in 1982, ‘became a permanent practice obviously because it was valuable to both sides.’ ‘The ease and informality of the Anglo-American partnership’, he continued, ‘has been a source of wonder—and no little resentment—to third countries.’ It went well beyond formal alliances and rested on liberal-democratic norms and a common Anglophone cultural heritage. The fact that Kissinger was speaking at the height of the Falklands conflict, when Washington, after initial hesitation, supported its ally Britain over its other ally, Argentina, is telling.[12]

Geopolitical realities were thus not the same as economic ones. Just as Mao’s China counted for a great deal more than its catastrophic GDP suggested, so was Britain’s role only partly limited by its economic woes. Despite its industrial decline, the United Kingdom’s alliances (especially the ‘Five Eyes’ intelligence-sharing agreement with the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand), global system of bases, deployments in Germany, nuclear deterrent, and Security Council seat meant that it remained a force to be reckoned with. For example, when Italy briefly registered a higher GDP figure than Britain did in 1987—dubbed *Il Sorpasso* (The Overtaking)—nobody, least of all the Italians, thought that Rome would become the new London.

If anything, the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s increased the relative importance of the United Kingdom. Britain helped to shape the post–Cold War settlement—for example, in the ‘Two Plus Four’ talks on the future of Germany. It contributed a full division to the removal of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991. Britain was also, for good or ill, a key international player during the first three years of the war in Bosnia from 1992 to 1995.[13]

After the election of a Labour government under Tony Blair in 1997, the United Kingdom became a leading exponent of humanitarian and liberal interventionism, including in Kosovo (1999) and Sierra Leone (2000). With the establishment of the Department of International Development in 1997, it also became an aid superpower. The subsequent decade saw a huge increase in the number and scale of Britain’s overseas operations, including the dispatch of another division to the Gulf in 2003 to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and a long counterinsurgency and nation-building campaign in Afghanistan. Though both interventions were failures (the latter a catastrophic one), and very controversial at home, they did underline the United Kingdom’s willingness and capacity for global engagement.[14]

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, though, Britain’s focus shifted from the Middle East to Europe and the Indo-Pacific. This partly reflected economic priorities but was mainly a reaction to political and geopolitical shifts. In Asia, British policymakers were first entranced by the economic possibilities which the rise of China and the entire region seemed to offer, and then unsettled by the threat which the PRC posed to global and regional security. With regard to Europe, there was increasing anxiety about Vladimir Putin’s ambitions, epitomised by his poisonings of dissidents on British soil; moreover, a large section of the public and the political class were also unhappy with the way in which membership in the European Union, in their view, compromised Britain’s democratic freedoms, national sovereignty, and ability to curb immigration from the rest of Europe.[15]

The relationship between Britain’s Great Powerness, or lack of it, and its membership in the European Union was a complicated one. An important part of the original argument for joining had been the belief that it would mitigate the decline in Britain’s international position, and an important argument advanced in favour of ‘remaining’ was that leaving the EU would

set the country ‘adrift’ in the world. Leavers, by contrast, claimed that membership prevented the country from realising its full global potential. Be that as it may, the EU did not limit Britain’s Great Powerness in the way that it did that of France and Germany, for the simple reason that it was neither part of the Schengen passportless travel zone nor part of the Eurozone. Nonetheless, there was a narrow vote in the June 2016 Brexit referendum in favour of the United Kingdom’s departure from the European Union.

What Britain takes from this history is a conflicted sense of its global role. Most of the time, most Britons, and certainly the elite, have felt that they lived in a primarily European country. As Winston Churchill, himself an arch-imperialist, said in 1913, on the eve of the First World War, and more or less at the height of the British Empire, ‘Europe is where the weather comes from.’ A substantial minority, though, was convinced that Britain had a more global destiny. This sentiment was strongest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, weaker during the period of EU membership, and picked up again in the era of Brexit. One way or the other, the divide between ‘Anglo-Saxons’ and ‘Europeans’, which the academic and Liberal Democrat peer Lord Wallace declared alive and well still at the end of the Cold War, endures to this day.[16]

What both groups agreed on, though, was that their country had played and would continue to play a significant role on the world stage. As one senior diplomat, Sir Oliver Franks, remarked in the 1950s, the idea that the United Kingdom was a Great Power was ‘part of the habit and furniture of our minds’. Half a century later, in 2004, the Conservative leader Michael Howard justified staying out of the euro by stating that his country was ‘the strongest military power in Europe [so] we should not have any fears about our influence’. This belief in Britain’s Great Power role was also widely shared beyond the elite. It was a mandate from history, a part of British identity, and it endures to this day, despite economic weaknesses and disillusionment with failed interventions in Suez, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and other places.[17]

That said, Britain’s Great Power status was also disputed, especially from the 1960s onwards, when economic challenges and the rise of other

powers led to widespread anxiety about Britain's loss of status. Today, these fears are partly driven by Brexit. Sir John Major, the former prime minister, expressed this view starkly to an audience of lawyers at the Middle Temple in London in November 2020, eleven months after Britain had left the European Union. 'We are no longer a great power,' he lamented. 'We will never be so again.' Brexit, Major warned, would reduce trade, increase unemployment, and 'risk breaking up the UK'. For good measure, he enjoined his audience to give up on the idea of 'British exceptionalism', the idea that the country had a special history and role in the world.[18]

Three years on, the distinguished historian Paul Kennedy, writing in the autumn of 2023, ranked the United States, the PRC, Russia, India, and the EU as Great Powers, but not Britain on account of its paltry GDP. A few months later, his eminent colleague David Reynolds lamented 'British exceptionalism' and called for recognition that twenty-first-century Britain lacked 'the power, position and wealth that we commanded when Britannia ruled the waves and waived the rules'. The former UK National Security Advisor Lord Ricketts stated that Britain now had the 'trappings' but not the 'reality' of Great Power status. His successor as national security advisor, Lord Sedwill, described the United Kingdom as merely an 'off-shore mid-sized power'. Some critics even go so far as to describe the United Kingdom as a 'vassal state' of the United States, a mere satrapy, from which the Americans harvest consumers, data, and political fealty.[19]

All the same, in the early twenty-first century there is still a general consensus among the British elite that Britain is one of the major actors in the world today, even if this is not usually articulated as a claim to Great Powerness. When he was prime minister, Tony Blair spoke of Britain as a 'pivotal power' and supported the expensive renewal of the nuclear deterrent on the grounds that its loss would mean 'too big a downgrading of our status as a nation'. His Conservative rivals also liked to celebrate Britain's strengths and standing—for example, in their 2010 election manifesto—and while they did not use the term, they certainly assumed that Britain was a Great Power.[20]

In part, the hesitation was due to the widespread belief that the world had entered a post–Great Power phase after the end of the Cold War. This view was most vividly articulated by Tony Blair in the late 1990s and early

2000s. In April 1999, he famously enunciated the ‘doctrine of international community’, by which the world, and especially its leading powers, of which the United Kingdom was one, should take responsibility for the entire globe, if necessary setting aside traditional norms of state sovereignty. It was this thinking which underpinned the British interventions in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.[21]

These operations responded to immediate, or at least perceived, challenges, but were also part of a broader ordering ambition in which the United Kingdom would play a central role. In early October 2001, not long after the attacks on the World Trade Center, Blair hailed ‘a moment to seize’ by the ‘world community’. ‘The kaleidoscope has been shaken,’ he argued, ‘the pieces are in flux, soon they will settle again. Before they do let us reorder this world around us and use modern science to provide prosperity for all.’ Neither Blair nor the rest of his government took on a leading role in Iraq out of mere fealty to the United States, but rather in the belief that it was Britain’s duty and interest as a major power to take a prominent role in the coalition.[22]

This vision was embedded in an understanding of economic and cultural globalisation which would transcend the old Great Power structures. In his Mansion House speech of November 2005, Blair hailed the resulting ‘spread, worldwide, of the values of democracy, justice and liberty’ as the best advancement of the UK national interest. On this reading, which was shared by Gordon Brown’s subsequent Labour government and his successor David Cameron’s Conservative-Liberal coalition, the rise of China was not a challenge to Western values but lifted all boats. Cameron continued Labour’s emphasis on international development, while his foreign secretary, William Hague, took up the mantle of defender of human rights.[23]

There was also a general sense that traditional state rivalries and military ‘peer competition’ were things of the past. Defence expenditure came down steadily after the end of the Cold War even as the forces were engaged much more intensively than before. The British Army of the Rhine, the great continental commitment, was wound down. As the first decade of the twenty-first century drew to a close, there was scant realisation that Britain had a border to defend in the east. The result was a reduction in the capacity

for ‘high-end’ warfighting, weakening Britain’s ability to deter and fight near-peer adversaries. The domestic defence industry also suffered, reducing its ability to surge production in a crisis. Instead, Britain’s leaders believed the future of international conflict to be about complex emergencies, counterinsurgency, and nation-building. They were also convinced that the only way the United Kingdom could remain relevant in the US-led unipolar world was by committing a significant ‘stake’, its armed forces, to the ‘Global War on Terror’.[24]

Since then, as the return of Great Power politics was registered by the United Kingdom, so did the assertion of British Great Powerness increase. When launching the new aircraft carrier *Queen Elizabeth* in 2017, Prime Minister Theresa May declared that Britain was ‘determined to remain a fully engaged global power’ and was ‘a leading member of NATO’ and ‘the foremost military power in Europe’. In March 2018, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office stated that ‘Britain has always taken a leading role in responding to global challenges’, and that in the future, following Brexit, ‘our foreign policy capability broadly drawn will ensure we are one of the major global players as now’. In late January 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed ‘a Britain that is simultaneously a great European power and truly global in range and ambitions’.[25]

Britain’s conception of its Great Power role is about much more than just crude military power; it is flanked by a strong moral aspiration. Shortly after Robin Cook was appointed foreign secretary in 1997, for example, he announced his intention to ‘make Britain once again a force for good in the world’. Cook also signalled that the United Kingdom would pursue a foreign policy with an ‘ethical dimension’, often rendered, inaccurately, as a commitment towards an ‘ethical foreign policy’.[26]

This was a concept and phrase which would echo across the following decades—for example, when Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab argued in 2019 that ‘Global Britain is leading the world as a force for good’, and two years later, when the government’s strategic review made a ‘renewed commitment to the UK as a force for good in the world’. This idea was disputed by many, both among the elite and in the wider public; they thought it humbug in view of Britain’s long-standing relationships with human rights abusers, such as Saudi Arabia, and what they regarded as the

violation of international law through the invasion of Iraq. Many felt that the language of ‘ethics’ was being used to justify or conceal interventions driven by other, more interest-based considerations. By and large, though, there was agreement that the United Kingdom used its substantial power to improve the world or at least should do so.[27]

What is conspicuously absent from current British thinking—so far—is any sense that the United Kingdom should constitute a separate ‘pole’ in world politics. This distinguishes Britain not just from Russia and the PRC, but also from France. Even while the United Kingdom was a member of the EU, this membership was never conceived, as it is in Paris, as part of some sort of ‘alternative’ to Washington. Instead of a multipolar world, London prefers to think of a bi-order system divided between Western democracies and the Eastern autocracies of Russia and China; other major actors, such as India, are classified as ‘swing states’. In short, Britain is comfortable with unipolarity, so long as it is Western and led by the United States.

Britain’s Great Power preoccupations after 2010 have been global, regional, and local. As one of the major beneficiaries of the Western rules-based international order, and an old trading nation, the United Kingdom is concerned to maintain freedom of navigation, ensure the security of supply chains, defend human rights (at least in principle), mitigate climate change, and uphold the territorial integrity of states. These ‘milieu goals’ have been challenged not merely by Sino-Russian authoritarianism and expansionism, but also by the rise of populist movements and governments in the West, by the election of the protectionist Donald Trump as president of the United States and his reelection eight years later, and to a certain extent by the European Union.

For much of the decade after the Brexit vote in 2016, London was preoccupied with economics. In addition to its long-standing productivity deficits, the British economy was threatened by Chinese competition, possible American tariffs, and the fallout from leaving the European single market. The predictions of the costs of Brexit were particularly dire—the Treasury warned of an ‘immediate and profound shock’ triggering a recession and costing nearly a million jobs within two years. Obviously, failure to grow (or at least to avoid shrinking) would seriously damage

Britain's capacity to act on the global stage, especially in the context of rapid growth in other parts of the world.[28]

The greatest challenges lay in Europe, and indeed within the United Kingdom itself. For more than forty years, the United Kingdom had done its political ordering in Europe through the European Union, and had fundamentally shaped some of its key institutions, such as the single market. Brexit meant that this role had to be rethought; indeed, there were many who doubted that the United Kingdom still had a role to play. In this spirit, Tom Fletcher, a former senior diplomat, wrote shortly after the referendum and the subsequent election of Donald Trump that 'Germany [had] emerged as the bulwark against fascism', and 'China [had] emerged as the defender of the Davos consensus' in favour of economic globalisation.[29]

London was attempting to extract itself from Europe and reposition Great Britain in the world at a time when the Union on which the state rested was under threat from Scottish nationalists. These had been seen off in a referendum on whether Scotland should leave the United Kingdom in 2014, but the vote to leave the European Union, which was opposed by a clear majority of Scots, gave fresh impetus to the reigning Scottish National Party in Edinburgh, though it had remarkably little impact on popular support for another referendum. In Northern Ireland, which had also voted to remain, albeit by a smaller margin, there were fears that leaving the EU would lead to a 'hard' customs border with the Republic of Ireland, which might jeopardise the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which had largely ended the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. There was even a growth in nationalist sentiment in Wales.

The European Union exploited these difficulties throughout the Brexit negotiations. It succeeded in laying down the law about the 'sequencing' of discussions, compelling the United Kingdom to settle all its outstanding 'debts' and to satisfy the demands of Brussels and Dublin over Northern Ireland before it would even begin to talk about the future economic relationship. In particular, the EU demanded that London agree to a 'backstop' which would, in the event of the United Kingdom leaving the single market and customs union, require the erection of controls in the Irish Sea between Northern Ireland and the rest of Britain—in effect, an

economic partition of the United Kingdom. The purposes of this policy were to raise the costs of Brexit, in order to deter would-be imitators in the rest of Europe; to satisfy the demands of the Republic of Ireland, a member state; and also, if possible, to prevent Brexit altogether. It seemed as if Ireland would once again become the ‘backdoor’ to England.[30]

It was clear that disintegration of the United Kingdom, or even just the departure of Scotland, would have serious implications for Britain’s Great Power status. The resulting loss of population and economic capacity would reduce the United Kingdom’s overall weight in the world. More importantly, there would be the huge strategic cost of lost coastline and bases, especially the nuclear submarine facilities at Faslane, on the Clyde in Scotland. Of course, the economic cost of dissolution would have been unequally distributed. Whereas England would drop in terms of global GDP from fifth or sixth place to eighth, just behind France, Scotland would drop to fifty-first, between New Zealand and Portugal; Wales to seventy-sixth, between Uzbekistan and Tanzania; and Northern Ireland to ninetieth, between Uganda and Myanmar.[31]

This threat to the future of the United Kingdom escalated at the very moment when the country was increasingly under threat from revisionist powers. Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine led to severe tensions on NATO’s eastern flank, especially in the Baltic Sea region and the Arctic. Russian aircraft frequently menaced British airspace, forcing the Royal Air Force to scramble fighter jets on a regular basis, and Russian, or Russian-sponsored, cyberattacks menaced the United Kingdom’s energy grid, health system, and other critical infrastructure. Moscow also targeted the United Kingdom through influence operations, playing on and widening its internal divisions. It was widely claimed that the support for Scotland’s departure from the United Kingdom, and the vote for Brexit, were the result of Russian ‘disinformation’.[32]

In Asia, the Cameron administration looked forward to a ‘Golden Era’ of trade with the PRC. Chinese investment in sensitive infrastructure projects, such as the Hinkley Point nuclear facility in 2015, was welcomed. The 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review nowhere flagged the PRC as a current or even remote threat, nor did Foreign and Commonwealth Ministry documents as late as 2017. In fact, when Donald Trump moved towards

confrontation with the PRC in 2018, Britain initially tried not to follow suit. Soon, though, American insistence that the United Kingdom disentangle itself from Chinese technology; revulsion over PRC repression in Hong Kong and other human rights abuses, particularly against the Uighurs of Xinjiang; and concerns about the vulnerability of British supply chains all turned China into a serious challenge for the United Kingdom. By the start of the 2020s, the PRC was clearly defined as a 'systemic challenge'.[33]

The United Kingdom's attempts to exit the EU and chart a new course in the world were initially fraught. In 2017–2019, Prime Minister Theresa May's proposed 'Withdrawal Agreement' sought to mitigate the feared economic costs, and to solve the Irish border issue, by keeping the United Kingdom within the EU single market and customs union. This would have reduced Britain to a mere 'rule-taker', in effect an economic vassal state. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom was unable to conclude any new trade arrangements until it had actually exited the European Union. Throughout these years, British domestic politics were roiled by disagreements over Brexit, with parliament voting against each and every withdrawal bill presented to it. These were times of trouble for Britain, which experienced low morale at home and widespread derision abroad.

At first, the United Kingdom proved unable to translate its very significant contribution to European defence into greater status on the continent. After the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Britain led the European military response, providing a 'tripwire' force to deter an attack on Estonia and leading the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), which was intended to bolster the security of the High North and Baltic Sea region. The JEF comprised Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland, though Sweden and Finland, significantly, were not at that point members of NATO. There was also an increased British interest in the Arctic. Through 'Operation Orbital' from 2015, Britain trained Ukrainian forces. So long as the EU generally, and Germany in particular, were set on engaging Moscow politically and economically, though, the British commitment to Europe's security counted for little in Brussels and most member-state capitals.[34]

It is therefore not surprising that the United Kingdom began to look to the wider world. This had always been a key plank of the Brexit programme, and with the appointment of Boris Johnson as foreign secretary in 2016, the slogan ‘Global Britain’ became the watchword. This reflected partly the sense that while Europe’s share of global GDP was declining, that of other areas was rising, and partly a reaction to the possible loss of European markets after Brexit. Negotiations were opened with India, Japan, and Australia, leading ultimately to free trade agreements with all three countries. Underpinning ‘Global Britain’ was the assumption that by taking advantage of the flexibility to conclude new trade deals after leaving the EU, London would buttress its Great Power position on the world stage.[35]

Globally, Britain redoubled its support for the liberal international order on which its role in the world system rested. Maintaining free trade, keeping the sea-lanes open, and ensuring the security of supply chains was more than ever a vital UK national interest. Regionally, London began to look east in what became known as the ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’. At the time of the Brexit referendum, the region’s share of global GDP was around 60 percent and rising. If the original plan was to deepen the relationship with China, this soon gave way—as Sino-American relations declined and Xi’s ambitions became more obvious—to a policy of containment of the PRC. In August 2017, the government announced the construction of a logistics base at Duqm in Oman on the Indian Ocean, and the following year Royal Navy vessels conducted ‘freedom of navigation operations’ in the South China Sea, much to the fury of the PRC.

The government’s ‘Integrated Review’ strategy document of 2021 announced the intention to become ‘the European partner with the broadest and most integrated presence in the Indo-Pacific’. Until that point, though, the concept of ‘Global Britain’ had struggled to gain traction, partly because it was easily derided as a form of ‘Empire 2.0’, partly because Brexit absorbed most of the available ‘headspace’, partly because of the United Kingdom’s limited resources, and partly because London could conclude no new trade deals until it had left the European Union. The initial scepticism with which many greeted Britain’s turn away from Europe towards Asia, in particular, was summed up by Australia’s former foreign minister Gareth Evans in 2017, when he warned that London would ‘find itself very lonely

indeed', and that 'the truth is that the United Kingdom has brought nothing of significance to the region's defence since the fall of Singapore'.[36]

Perhaps the lowest moments were in 2020 and early 2021, when Britain was widely perceived to have responded badly to the COVID pandemic, and while a new trade deal with the EU was being negotiated; the latter was finally agreed, after a lot of acrimony, on Christmas Eve 2020. During this period, France responded to disagreements about fishing rights with threats to cut off the electricity supply to the Channel Islands. Subsequently, both French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel spread untruths about the efficacy of the British Astra-Zeneca vaccine among older people. The European Commission, for its part, imposed a very brief blockade along the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in order to prevent doses of that selfsame vaccine ordered by Britain from being supplied to the United Kingdom.

But feelings ran high on the British side, too. London accused the Europeans of weaponising migrant flows to undermine Brexit. Over Northern Ireland, the government threatened to selectively break its international commitments under the Northern Ireland Protocol, which left the province inside the EU's single market and customs union in order to mitigate the damage it caused to the United Kingdom's own internal market. In early 2021, Prime Minister Johnson was so frustrated with EU policies that he asked the armed services, half in jest and half in earnest, to plan a special-forces raid into the Netherlands to secure vaccines that Brussels was refusing to release. In part, the confrontational stance towards the EU over migrants, Northern Ireland, and vaccines was shaped by domestic political pressure to appear tough on Brexit.[37]

From mid-2021 onwards, the tide began to turn, and the EU-British relationship changed more generally. Britain rolled out its vaccine programme more quickly than the rest of Europe. The Scottish National Party under Nicola Sturgeon was beset by scandals. Support for breaking up the United Kingdom began to fall. The EU steadily retreated over Northern Ireland, culminating in the Windsor Agreement of 2023, which alleviated some of the worst economic disruption. The Union looked stronger than at any point in the previous ten years. The immediate economic cost of Brexit,

though surely substantial, was not crippling. By the early 2020s, therefore, Britain had re-emerged as a coherent actor on the world stage.[38]

What really altered the dynamic, though, was the shift in European geopolitics produced by Russian aggression. Throughout the autumn of 2021 and the winter of 2021–2022, Vladimir Putin stepped up his threats against Ukraine. British intelligence coordinated closely with Washington to warn the rest of the world, often fruitlessly, of Moscow's intentions. Britain also led the way in the supply of weaponry, especially anti-tank rockets, and intelligence support to Ukraine. This policy was vindicated in late February 2022, when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Thereafter, Britain served as one of the main hubs for supplying Ukraine, and for nearly eighteen months it was the largest donor of military aid to Ukraine behind the United States, a position it eventually yielded to Germany. Besides, being outside the EU, Britain was able to implement a substantially tougher sanction regime against Russia than the one Brussels could. The United Kingdom was also the main European guarantor of the security of the Baltic and High North.[39]

Meanwhile, Britain had become a much stronger presence in the Indo-Pacific region. In the autumn of 2021, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States concluded the AUKUS agreement to develop a new nuclear-powered submarine force in the region. To the fury of Paris, this superseded an existing deal between France and Australia to build diesel submarines. Around the same time, the UK carrier strike group led by HMS *Queen Elizabeth* sailed to the Far East as part of what was planned to be a rotational deployment every two years. Right at the end of 2022, the United Kingdom, Italy, and Japan agreed to develop a joint fighter jet through the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP). This was in preference to joining the rival, and exclusively European, venture known as the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) by Germany, France, and Spain. In January 2023, Britain and Japan concluded a military reciprocal access agreement giving the United Kingdom quasi-operational rights in that country, followed a few months later by a significant political agreement known as the Hiroshima Accord.

These initiatives were driven by desire to engage in Asia in its own right as the rising global economic dynamo, by the hope that they would make it

harder for Asia-firsters in Washington to argue in favour of US withdrawal from Europe, and by the belief that, as Foreign Secretary Liz Truss put it in March 2022, ‘Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific Security are indivisible’. ‘If we let Putin’s expansionism go unchallenged’, she continued, ‘it would send a dangerous message to would-be aggressors and authoritarians around the world.’ Tokyo, from where Prime Minister Fumio Kishida had issued similar warnings, was particularly receptive to this message.[40]

This engagement was matched by a deepening of Britain’s economic relationship with the world outside Europe, especially Asia. Many of the trade agreements concluded after Brexit were simply rollovers of the existing arrangements with the EU, but there were significant changes in some cases. The new deal with Australia and New Zealand lowered tariffs on agricultural imports, with the hope of bringing down food prices, and secured lower tariffs for UK exports. The Japanese deal involved a slight improvement for British digital and financial services. Most importantly of all, in July 2023 the United Kingdom committed to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership which seeks to liberalise trade, reduce tariffs, and establish common rules on investment among the contracting parties.

The Labour government which took office in July 2024 changed some of the emphases of British policy but not its fundamental direction. It espoused what Foreign Secretary David Lammy termed ‘Progressive Realism’. As befitted a lawyer, Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer stressed the importance of international law and on that basis was determined to ‘return’ the Chagos Islands to Mauritius (a country which did not exist prior to their seizure by Britain) as part of a UN-mandated decolonisation programme, despite the strategic value of the base in the heart of the Indian Ocean. The economic overtures to the PRC, by contrast, were conceived of as a realist response to Britain’s perceived lack of options after Brexit. London also sought a more ‘structured dialogue’ with the European Union, leading to the new EU-UK Security and Defence Partnership in May 2025. For the rest, especially with regards to security commitments to Europe and in the Indo-Pacific, British policy remained largely unchanged.[41]

Britain's claim to Great Power status rests in large part on its economic and military power, which is less than in days gone by, but still formidable. The United Kingdom usually has the fifth or sixth highest GDP in the world, either just before or just behind that of France and India. Until recently, it had the third largest defence budget in the world, ahead of Russia, and though it slipped slightly in relative terms during the early 2020s, it has usually been among the top four or five spenders globally over time. The Royal Navy is the fourth largest by tonnage, and in its two new aircraft carriers boasts a capability which is exceeded only by the United States. Britain is also one of the few countries in the world with a substantial 'heavy lift' capacity, meaning that UK forces can be deployed quickly across the world. The quality of British armed forces is widely believed to be very high, with extensive recent experience in counterinsurgency operations and the capacity to conduct 'peer competitor' warfare.

Underpinning the United Kingdom's conventional capabilities is the British nuclear deterrent, which consists of 225 warheads, a number set to increase. This rests on four submarines, one of which is always at sea. The current *Vanguard* fleet is due to be replaced by the new *Dreadnought*-class submarine in the early 2030s. The decision to deploy the deterrent, which is assigned to the defence of NATO allies, lies solely with the prime minister. The targeting of the weapons is also entirely independent and does not rely on American assistance.[42]

Of course, Britain's resources are limited and in important respects diminishing. Despite increases in defence spending in response to the growing Russian threat, the United Kingdom has been unable to maintain capabilities in key sectors, such as maritime patrol aircraft, and it struggles to provide adequate escorts for the carrier strike group without neglecting other commitments. In addition, the armed services suffer from major recruitment and retention problems, which means that many regiments, ships, and bases are seriously understrength.[43]

There is also a question mark over the nuclear deterrent: It may be independently deployable, but—unlike those of its allies and peer competitors—Britain's missiles are designed, made, tested, and maintained by the United States and US companies. If Washington were to break off collaboration, London would have a short window of time in which to make

alternative arrangements. Two missile launch failures in a row, in 2016 and 2024, suggest that maintenance needs to be improved if the deterrent is to remain credible.

Because of the distortions produced by the COVID pandemic, it is hard to establish the economic effects of Brexit. In some sectors, the United Kingdom flourished—for example, by raising as much start-up cash as France and Germany put together in 2023. Shortly after, though, the IMF predicted that Britain would experience the lowest growth of all the bigger developed nations in 2024, below even that of sanctions-hit Russia. Starmer's new Labour administration was almost immediately buffeted by severe economic headwinds, and in the summer of 2025 there was talk that Britain might have to seek an IMF bailout, so the United Kingdom's capacity to maintain its influence in the world cannot be taken for granted.[44]

When it comes to reach, that of the United Kingdom is second only to that of the United States. There are British bases in Gibraltar and Cyprus, the Falklands and other South Atlantic islands, and (at least for now) in the Chagos Archipelago (leased to the United States). There are also British overseas territories in the Caribbean and Pacific. Historically, this reach was supplemented by a huge overseas aid budget, formerly the third biggest in the world. In the World Bank, the United Kingdom, along with France, has the fourth largest voting power, after that of the United States, Japan, and Germany. The Commonwealth, which links most of the countries of the former empire and some newcomers, also helps Britain to project influence globally, through its institutional network, through the ties created by a common language, shared histories, and immigration pathways, and in many other ways. Furthermore, the United Kingdom maintains embassies or high commissions in nearly every capital of the world, as well as consulates in many other cities.[45]

That said, the decision of Boris Johnson's government to merge the Department of International Development with the Foreign Office in 2020 signalled a downgrading of foreign aid, which has damaged Britain's global soft-power influence. So has the progressive reduction of the aid budget, formerly 0.7 percent of GDP, to 0.5 percent under the last Conservative government, to the 0.3 percent the Starmer administration plans to achieve

by 2027. This reduced investment in overseas aid and the more explicit linking of development projects with the United Kingdom's national interests risks reducing its influence and encourages recipients to look elsewhere for help, especially to China. All this was symptomatic, of course, of the shift from the previous concern with state failure, complex emergencies, and global development goals towards 'peer competition' with large states such as Russia.

Britain's reputation as a Great Power is variable. Its status is routinely denied by some of its allies—for example, certain European states during the Brexit crisis—and by its Russian and PRC rivals. In 2013, the Kremlin dismissed Britain as 'a small island no-one pays attention to'. Still, Russia paid London the backhanded compliment of concentrating much of its invective, nuclear threats, and hybrid warfare—such as cyberattacks and disinformation campaigns—on the United Kingdom. Likewise, the PRC liked to dismiss the United Kingdom's Great Power qualifications. Shortly after the Brexit referendum in June 2016, *The Global Times*, a CCP English-language publication, wrote that the result would 'probably be a landmark event that proves Britain is heading in the direction of being a small country with few people, which is writing itself off as hopeless and acting recklessly'. In the early 2020s, after Britain had finally left the EU, the *China Daily* lambasted the United Kingdom for conflating 'Global Britain with Colonial Britain', for clinging to 'the tatty old dreams of empire that have been fluttering feebly at the mast', and for not being able to 'shake the heady notion that Britannia still rules the waves'. That said, some Chinese officials, such as Foreign Minister Wang Yi, writing in 2021, recognized Britain's international role and status, while the former ambassador to the United Kingdom spoke of it as 'a country with global influence' that like the PRC was a permanent member of the UN Security Council, one of the 'world's major economies' that shared with China 'an important mission of safeguarding world peace and prosperity'.[46]

Elsewhere, Britain's status is high. A report for the Atlantic Council in 2021, for example, stated clearly that in the Baltic and High North the United Kingdom was 'a security and defence actor of major importance and prominence', and that 'countries are dependent on UK presence and protection in their neighbourhood'. More broadly, the United Kingdom is

generally regarded as the most significant and reliable European military actor behind the United States. For example, when Finland and Sweden applied to join NATO in May 2022, it was from the United Kingdom that the two countries requested and received a bilateral security guarantee for the period between application and actual membership in the alliance. Moreover, it was striking that when President Zelensky of Ukraine visited European capitals in February 2023, he went to London before visiting Brussels and the EU member-state capitals.[47]

Britain also enjoys a high standing in much of Asia, at least outside China and its friends, partly as a result of its military commitments to the region, but mainly because of the widespread perception that London has been leading the European effort to contain Russian aggression. A victory for Putin in Ukraine, it is felt in Tokyo, Canberra, and Taipei, would embolden Xi to attack Taiwan or to ramp up the pressure in the South China Sea. The United States is still the main point of reference, of course, but Britain is the next most important partner for Tokyo. Japan strongly welcomed the dispatch of the carrier strike force in 2021; contrary to a widespread view, the Royal Navy, when deployed, makes a substantial difference to the maritime balance of power in the region.[48]

In the same spirit, the Japanese minister of economy, trade, and industry hailed the ‘tremendous geopolitical significance’ of the United Kingdom joining the CPTPP, which signalled London’s intent to embed itself in the Indo-Pacific’s economic networks, reinforcing its political and security presence in the region. In South-East Asia, the United Kingdom was rated the sixth most important power by the research centre of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2024. Unsurprisingly, it came after China, the United States, Japan, the European Union, and South Korea, but —surprisingly, perhaps—ahead of Australia, Russia, and even nearby India.[49]

There are some in London who believe that the United Kingdom should focus primarily on soft power, and its strengths in that field are truly remarkable. The English language, the country’s status as the ‘mother of parliaments’ and modern democracy, its leading universities, the monarchy, entertainment franchises such as James Bond and the whole national narrative, as celebrated in the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympics

(2012), all bolster the country's standing in the world. So does the BBC, especially its World Service, which Monica Harding, the Liberal Democrat spokeswoman for International Development, described as 'the jewel in the UK's soft power crown', and the British Council, which promotes educational links with and cultural understanding of the United Kingdom. Britain's soft-power rankings took a battering during Brexit but soon returned to their very high levels after the United Kingdom took a strong stance on Ukraine. In fact, Britain was more attractive to global youth, including European youth, in 2023 than it had been before the referendum: The country ranked first or second worldwide in terms of trust in its people, government, and institutions.[50]

Finally, the United Kingdom has demonstrated exceptional resilience as a Great Power. It enjoys the longest continuous statehood of all the major actors, going back at least to the Anglo-Scottish union of 1707, but arguably to the origins of England itself. It lost wars and empires, but it always bounced back. It has a long record of success in the conflicts it has faced, including against Bourbon France, Napoleon, Imperial Germany, Hitler, and the Soviet Union. In recent times, the British public, though more diverse and divided than at most points in the past, has also shown a remarkable willingness to accept military casualties in pursuit of the national interest.[51]

Overall, then, the United Kingdom is still one of the four or five leading global powers—a force, if not always for good, then at least always to be reckoned with. For hundreds of years, it has coped with whatever the international system has thrown at it. Britain, while well behind the United States, is ahead of Russia in most measures of Great Powerness (excepting nuclear weapons), and, while economically much weaker than the PRC, it enjoys a greater global military 'reach', for now, and a substantial soft-power lead. The United Kingdom's Great Power status, though, is by no means secure. If Britain cannot muster the necessary resources, its hard power could decay to a level where it would be forced to fundamentally reconsider its role in the world, or, more humiliatingly still, to have that judgement made by others.

In policy terms, the future of Britain as a Great Power will primarily be determined by how well it navigates the traditional tension between its European and global commitments. If the country plays its cards right, if

the environment develops favourably, or if it is simply lucky, London will create a virtuous cycle by which its engagement in Europe and the Indo-Pacific will generate status which can be parlayed into strength in both theatres. If it plays its cards badly, or is dealt a poor hand globally, or is simply unlucky, the United Kingdom risks finding itself overstretched across the world and distracted from the defence of the Home Islands. If Russia continues its aggression in Europe and a Sino-American conflict simultaneously erupts in Asia, there is a distinct possibility that the United Kingdom might be called on its position in both theatres at the same time. If that happens, we will then know whether Global Britain is the answer or the problem.

Thirteen

The Continued Dominance of the United States

THE UNITED STATES is not just indisputably a Great Power but also, at least for now, the most powerful of the Great Powers. Indeed, for a long time America was the *only* Great Power. Although it has played a major role as far back as anyone can remember, the United States is actually one of the younger Great Powers, having entered the lists during the twentieth century. Despite widespread uneasiness with the very idea of Great Power politics, which the new republic wanted to transcend, the United States supplanted the British Empire and saw off several rival powers, in particular Imperial Japan, Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. Today, America is the ideal type of Great Power because it commands the necessary resources, possesses capabilities right across the political and military spectrum, and plays a major role in almost every corner of the world. It is the yardstick against which all other powers measure themselves. Despite this, America is beset by self-doubt as it contemplates a future in which it not just has to contend with other Great Powers but is overtaken as the greatest of the Great Powers by a rival, probably the People's Republic of China.

The United States was conceived as, and in many respects has remained, both a Great Power and an anti–Great Power project. In the late eighteenth century, the American colonists rebelled against the British crown partly because they believed that London was failing to deal with the threat from France and Spain and partly because it was protecting the Indian tribes from further encroachments. At the same time, other colonists wanted to distance themselves from the old European balance of power in which they had been

caught up, and they were inherently suspicious of anything that smacked of what we would today call a ‘national security state’. Thomas Jefferson, for example, thought that patriots should establish an ‘Empire of Liberty’ as a model for others, but his emphasis was on the force of example rather than armed force. The early United States of America which emerged after the British threw in the towel therefore lacked both a serious army and navy and the machinery of government capable of mobilising one.[1]

It was clear to many patriots that this state of affairs could not last long, because they feared that the European empires would try to recolonise the young Republic. For this reason, they explicitly set out to create a structure which would survive in a world of predatory Great Powers. The Constitution of 1787 established a powerful executive and a legislature with enough authority to raise the funds necessary to support it. In 1812–1814, the Americans kept the British at bay once again, albeit without territorial gains, or any meaningful concessions on maritime rights, and at the price of the burning of the White House. Ten years later, in 1823, fearful that the collapsing Spanish American empire would be gobbled up by other European powers, President James Monroe proclaimed his famous doctrine, which decreed that the United States would not tolerate any new imperialist possessions in the Western Hemisphere (other than its own). For now, this claim was actually enforced by the Royal Navy rather than the United States, but the principle of a US sphere of influence was established.

Not everyone agreed that the young republic should be a Great Power engaged in global affairs. The Revolutionary War leader and the country’s first president, George Washington, spoke in his legendary Farewell Address about the danger of ‘entangling alliances’. In the same spirit, the early nineteenth-century president John Quincy Adams cautioned that the United States should not go ‘in search of monsters to destroy’. This tradition, which lives on today, for example, in the American Quincy Institute, an organisation dedicated to fighting what it regards as an excessive tendency to interfere in the affairs of other nations, remains strong in the United States.

Over the next decades, the United States concentrated on what contemporaries called its ‘Manifest Destiny’, westward expansion towards the Pacific Ocean. This involved the seizure of the lands of Native

Americans and their murder or displacement into ‘reservations’. The drive south towards Cuba, originally equally strong, stalled over slavery. The North would not countenance more slave states in the Union, and after the Civil War, the South refused to incorporate any more free people of colour, because to do so would have complicated the suppression of the newly emancipated African Americans. Sectional divisions of one sort or another, in fact, remained a major obstacle to the development of the United States as a Great Power.

Despite this, Americans were also capable of coming together under pressure and uniting for common projects. Even before the Revolution, Puritan settlers had seen America as a ‘City upon a Hill’, and the widespread belief that the young nation was a ‘promised land’, with a special global mission, was widespread in the post-Revolutionary era. ‘Providence’, President Andrew Jackson claimed in his Farewell Address of 1837, ‘has showered on this favored land blessings without number and has chosen you as the guardians of freedom, to preserve it for the benefit of the human race.’ This ideology of American exceptionalism would shape the country’s relations with the rest of the world, so that it could never just be another Great Power.[2]

Meanwhile, the United States experienced stupendous economic growth fuelled by land seizures, industrialisation, and mass immigration. The exact point at which its GDP exceeded that of Britain is disputed, but by 1890 the United States was probably the largest economy in the world. This did not immediately translate into Great Power status, however. In the 1880s, the US Navy was still smaller than the Chilean one. Economic strength certainly did not mean that Washington had overtaken London in geopolitical terms. Besides, while there were many Americans who looked forward to displacing their former colonial power, there were many others who hoped for some kind of ‘Anglo-Saxon’ condominium in the world.[3]

Right at the end of the century, the disintegration of what remained of the Spanish American empire, with some American help, turned the United States into a truly global power. For a while, it occupied not only Cuba but also the Philippines. President Theodore Roosevelt’s Great White Fleet sailed the seas. In China the Americans pursued a rigorous Open Door Policy in commerce. The United States was now recognised, often with

alarm, as a Great Power. This was reflected in the fact that President Roosevelt acted as mediator between Russia and Japan at the Treaty of Portsmouth, which took place in New Hampshire in 1905. The United States still, however, showed little inclination to enter the Great Power bearpit in Europe.

This changed in 1917, when President Woodrow Wilson decided that Imperial Germany posed a threat not merely to American commerce, through its policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, but also to American security, through its expansionist policies generally, and in particular its support for Mexico's territorial ambitions. It took some time after its declaration of war for US forces to reach France, but their arrival soon proved decisive. Wilson sought to follow up this triumph with the establishment of a system of global governance embodied by the League of Nations. He dominated the postwar negotiations at Versailles and sent forces to support the Whites in their civil war against the Bolsheviks in Russia. In the Washington Naval Agreement of 1922, the Americans were the only power permitted to build warships up to the same level as the Royal Navy. The United States was now, next to the British Empire, the world's greatest power.

At this point, however, the country's inherent discomfort with the very idea of Great Powerness reasserted itself. Congress refused to ratify membership in the League of Nations, and the country stood back from military involvement in Europe. Wilson's internationalism gave way to isolationism. The determination to shape the world through economic statecraft, however, remained. In the Dawes (1924) and Young (1929) Plans, Washington sought to put Germany on the road to economic recovery to enable it to pay off its reparations bill and reintegrate into international society. In China, the United States continued to insist that the country should not become a Japanese colony but remain open to world trade, which critics maintained was 'Anglo-Saxon' colonialism under another name.

Then the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the ensuing Great Depression came along, severely limiting the country's ability to sustain its economic leadership abroad. Americans turned inwards and focused on rebuilding their prosperity through President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programmes. Though the president strongly opposed Imperial Japan, Fascist

Italy, and Nazi Germany, especially Germany, there was little appetite in the country to confront any of those powers. There was a general sense among the ‘isolationists’—disillusioned with the cost of the First World War and its grubby aftermath—that the United States should concentrate on its own hemisphere and nation. The ‘America First Committee’, which formed in 1940, demanded just that, insisting on nonintervention during the initial stages of the Second World War.

The isolationist assumption that the United States could remain inviolate behind the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, however, was severely tested by the German-Japanese Axis. American strategists feared that if Britain and Soviet Russia collapsed, the whole of Eurasia would fall under the sway of a single power and build up a force large enough to threaten the continental United States. Then Japan attacked out of the blue at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and Hitler declared war on the United States four days later. The United States now not only brought overwhelming force to bear in both theatres, but also supplied a significant amount of the war equipment used by its British and Soviet allies. Ultimately, Germany and Japan were completely vanquished. In the process, the United States acquired the capacity and the appetite to vindicate a very expansive view of what its ‘national security’, a term coined during this period, required.[4]

In 1945, America bestrode the globe like a colossus, the war’s conclusion leaving it with a worldwide network of bases and logistical hubs which helped lay the groundwork for a post-1945 role as a permanent global military power. President Roosevelt was instrumental in establishing the United Nations, with the United States having a permanent veto-wielding seat on its Security Council. For now, it also enjoyed a nuclear monopoly, after having dropped two atomic bombs on Japan with devastating effect. The Pacific, long contested, was now, as General Douglas MacArthur put it in 1949, an ‘Anglo-Saxon Lake’ dominated by the Americans and their British allies, though it would not remain so for long.[5]

Moreover, the new institutions of international economic governance set up at Bretton Woods—the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—were dominated by America. Convertible currencies were pegged to the dollar, which in turn was pegged to gold. If a country was planning to shift

the rate of conversion of its currency by more than 1 percent, that had to be done in consultation with the IMF. Whereas during the first half of the century the Anglo-Americans had run an open financial system, in the third quarter America alone would dominate a much more formal structure.

The challenge of the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China prompted the United States to lead a global policy to 'contain' communism. The US-funded Marshall Plan helped to get Western Europe back on its feet after World War II, and the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation locked Washington into the defence of the European continent. America's reach now spread across the world through a network of military bases, relationships, and treaties which endures to this day. US troops were deployed to Europe, South Korea, Japan, and many other places. Some referred to this as an American 'empire' or even a 'tributary system', but in Europe at least the connection was entirely voluntary. This was reflected in the response President Lyndon Johnson gave to French demands that NATO should move its headquarters away from Fontainebleau near Paris, because France was withdrawing from NATO's integrated command structure. 'When a man asks you to leave his house,' the president said, 'you don't argue, you get your hat and go.' NATO headquarters was then moved to Brussels, where it remains.[6]

During the 1960s, the US role in the world was increasingly challenged at home and abroad, leading to a full-scale crisis by the end of the decade. Economic power was shifting to Europe and Japan. The oil-producing Gulf states became more assertive. The growing prosperity of Europe and Japan caused a balance of payments crisis. There was an outflow of gold, making it difficult to run the Bretton Woods system. Not only were US forces bogged down fighting communist infiltrators in South Vietnam, but the war deepened rifts in an American society already riven by racial, social, and cultural tensions. Matters came to a head during the 1968 presidential election campaign, which was marked by riots; the assassination of Robert Kennedy, a leading contender for the Democratic presidential nomination; and disagreements over the direction of American foreign policy. Widespread coverage of the brutality of the Vietnam War and civil rights clashes at home weakened America's image as a champion of freedom and undermined its global influence.

By the 1970s, the United States appeared to many, including many Americans, to be a Great Power in decline. Due to the costs of US overseas commitments, as well as economic travails at home, President Richard Nixon broke the dollar's link to gold, thus dissolving the Bretton Woods system, in 1971. Most US forces in Vietnam were withdrawn after the Paris Peace Accords in 1973; two years later the humiliation was complete when the North Vietnamese regular army overran Saigon. Congress severely curtailed covert operations, restricted presidential authority under the War Powers Resolution, and regularly discussed radically reducing US forces in Western Europe. Right at the end of the decade, the Iranian Revolution swept away the Shah of Iran, an old US ally; the leftist Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua; and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Economically, America's troubles were summarised by a stark statistic: The US share of global GDP dropped from 40 percent in 1960 to 25 percent in 1980.

In this context, it made sense for President Nixon's national security advisor and later secretary of state, Henry Kissinger, to conceive of the United States as just one of a number of global powers, albeit the most powerful one. In 1972, Nixon and Mao met in Beijing and began a rapprochement directed at containing the Soviet Union. Nixon also launched a process of détente with Moscow that resulted in significant nuclear arms limitation agreements. These policies were continued by his successors. Gerald Ford signed the Helsinki Accords (1975) in Europe and presided over the creation of the G7 club of advanced economies that same year. His successor, Jimmy Carter, completed the rapprochement with the PRC, recognising Beijing in place of Taiwan, whose security was guaranteed by a separate Taiwan Relations Act (1979). In the meantime, the United States succeeded in asserting itself as the principal ordering power in the Middle East, where Kissinger negotiated the disengagement agreements after the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Jimmy Carter brought Egypt and Israel together at Camp David five years later.

The election of President Ronald Reagan in 1980 heralded a shift in American Great Power politics. Reagan radically increased US defence expenditure and stepped up the containment of the Soviet Union, so much so that observers spoke of a 'Second Cold War'. America invaded the Caribbean island of Grenada in 1983, removing the Marxist regime there to

vindicate the Monroe Doctrine, and bombed Libya in 1986, demonstrating its determination to act against state sponsors of terrorism. It also massively increased support for the *mujahedin* in Afghanistan who were battling the Soviet occupiers. US economic growth, which had stuttered in the 1970s, picked up again. American technical innovation surged, stimulated not least by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). Some were concerned, though, by the immense financial costs of these programmes, which helped lead to a ballooning federal deficit. It was in this context that Paul Kennedy wrote his famous book *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987), warning of the dangers of 'imperial overstretch'.

These fears receded with the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989–1991. The United States suddenly found itself to be not merely the leader of the 'free world', but leader of more or less the entire world. When a US-led coalition took only a few days to overwhelm the Iraqi army—supposedly the fourth strongest globally—in early 1991, the transformation was complete. President George H.W. Bush declared the ghosts of Vietnam exorcised. Talk of American 'hegemony', 'unipolarity', and 'empire' became routine. President Bush spoke of a 'New World Order' of 'peace and security, freedom and the rule of law', in which 'American leadership' was 'indispensable'.[7]

While some of the elite and much of the public now wanted to take a step back from global engagement and cash in on the 'peace dividend', the real debate was about whether the United States should focus on preempting the rise of future challengers or concentrate instead on developing a rules-based international system in which Great Power politics would become irrelevant. Both approaches were based on a sense of American exceptionalism—in the first case because it was proposed to tolerate no other powers next to the United States, and in the second instance because the new order was not only to be led by the United States, but would also require America's sovereign exemption from some of its provisions to make it functional. This desire for an exemption from international rules, of course, has been the hallmark of Great Power behaviour down through the ages.

The idea that the United States should try to nip any potential rival in the bud was driven not—primarily—by hubris but by a historically informed

sense of the connection between Great Power conflict and destructive war. After all, as the Pentagon planner and later US ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad argued, multipolarity had led to the world wars, and bipolarity had fuelled the Cold War and brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation. For this reason, Dick Cheney, who had served as secretary of defense under George H.W. Bush and became vice president under George W. Bush, stated in the early 1990s that the US objective was to stop any hostile power from dominating a 'critical region' from which it could draw the resources to threaten the United States.[8]

In the 1990s, US policy took a different course under President Bill Clinton. Clinton approved the enlargement of NATO in order to fill the vacuum opening up in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. He also intervened twice in former Yugoslavia in order to prevent genocide, first to defend Bosnian Muslims against the Bosnian Serbs, and then the Kosovar Albanians against Serbia itself. Far from seeking to curb the rise of China, the United States encouraged it, at least economically, even at the cost of the deindustrialisation of large swathes of the American heartland as manufacturing jobs were lost to 'globalization', especially competition from the PRC. Dismissing warnings about the potential danger of Chinese growth, Clinton stated in March 2000 that 'the more China liberalizes its economy, the more fully it will liberate the potential of its people'. Economic freedom, the general view ran, would bring political freedom—democracy—in its train.[9]

It was axiomatic to Clinton's administrations not only that the United States should lead, but that its security depended on the spread of American values. America, said Secretary of State Madeleine Albright in 1998, was simply 'the indispensable nation'. While Europe had dithered over the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, she argued, it was the United States which had acted to uphold human rights and support representative government. Indeed, America acted according to the belief that the defence of democracy at home required its promotion worldwide.[10]

Throughout the 1990s, in fact, the United States managed much of the world, or seemed to. The Americans were closely involved in peacemaking from the Middle East to Northern Ireland, where the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 largely ended the 'Troubles'. US forces underwrote the

security of Europe, East Asia, and the Gulf region. America was central to the conclusion of free trade agreements across the world, especially that of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which eliminated most trade barriers and tariffs between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Many spoke of a Pax Americana. It was at this point, too, that American tech companies such as Microsoft began their meteoric ascent. All this was underpinned by a period of remarkable economic growth, low unemployment, and low inflation.

President Clinton summed up the general sense of optimism and the widespread feeling that the era of the Great Powers had finally passed in December 2000, saying, ‘As we enter the new millennium, we are blessed to be citizens of a country enjoying record prosperity, with no deep divisions at home, no overriding external threats abroad, and history’s most powerful military.’ ‘Americans of earlier days’, he continued, ‘may have hoped one day to live in a nation that could claim just one of these blessings. Probably few expected to experience them all; fewer still all at once.’[11]

Then came the terrorist attacks of September 2001. Under the administration of George W. Bush, who had campaigned in the 2000 election on the platform of a ‘more humble America’, the United States expanded its global reach still further, setting up bases in Central Asia and invading and occupying Afghanistan and Iraq. The latter operation was justified as a preventive war in order to forestall the possible use of weapons of mass destruction by the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein at some future point. Washington did not lose sight of the threat from the larger powers. The US National Security Strategy of 2002 announced that US forces should be ‘strong enough to dissuade potential adversaries from pursuing a military build-up in hopes of surpassing, or equaling, the power of the United States’. This was no idle boast, because at that point, US defence expenditure was as large as that of the next eleven major spenders combined.[12]

Bush flanked these moves with policies which, on the one hand, involved collaborating with repressive regimes to detain and torture terrorist suspects, and, on the other hand, saw Washington promote the democratic transformation of the Middle East and other contested regions. ‘The

survival of liberty in our land', Bush argued in his Second Inaugural Address in early 2005, 'increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world.' Previously, he had identified Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an 'Axis of Evil' threatening the United States.[13]

This expansive vision was not shared by many Americans, who grieved for the more than four thousand US military casualties in Iraq and many more civilians there, and were revolted by the abuse of captives at the Abu Ghraib detention facility in Iraq. Afghanistan, too, proved intractable, in many ways more so. In consequence, the moral authority of the United States was dented both at home and abroad, reducing its soft power, and US resources were stretched thin at a time when other competitors were beginning to make their presence felt more strongly than before.[14]

There had already been some resistance to US hegemony in the 1990s, especially from the PRC, Russia, Iran, North Korea, and various non-state actors, but the Bush administration provoked a much stronger reaction. The attack on Iraq was furiously opposed by Russia, the PRC, several European powers, and many others as a flagrant violation of international law which might serve as a precedent for further interventions, including against themselves. There was also a widespread sense of unease in global civil society about a United States which many regarded as unilateralist and unconcerned with the real challenges facing the world, such as climate change, poverty, and disease. Some critics, including American ones, even dubbed it a 'rogue nation'.[15]

That said, most of the 'Global War on Terror' resonated positively among the larger powers and more widely. The American bases in Central Asia, for example, would not have been possible without Russian cooperation. Indeed, both Moscow and Beijing hoped that a common front against 'terrorism' and Islamist extremism would provide the basis for a new collaborative multipolar system. It was only towards the end of George W. Bush's second administration that tension with Russia flared over the enlargement of NATO and the invasion of Georgia.

The administration of Barack Obama, whose election victory in 2008 was partly driven by popular fatigue at the interventionism of the Bush administration, was marked by a less aggressive approach to foreign policy,

partly for intellectual reasons but also because the cost of the Global War on Terror and the fallout from the financial crisis of 2008 made retrenchment inevitable. Obama remained focused on the terrorist threat but paid more attention to global challenges such as climate change. He led from behind during the Anglo-French-inspired NATO intervention against Libya in 2011, though US intelligence, targeting, aerial refuelling, and precision strike capabilities were still central to the allied victory there.

Like his predecessors, though, Obama did not see international politics primarily through the lens of Great Power politics. He sought a ‘reset’ with Russia, and when the Republican candidate in the 2012 election, Mitt Romney, warned of the dangers of Russian expansionism, the president ridiculed him for being stuck in a Cold War mindset. In 2010, Obama signed the New START Treaty on nuclear arms reduction with the Kremlin. Two years later, the United States was instrumental in helping Russia to join the World Trade Organization. There were widespread hopes in Washington that despite Russia’s aggression in Georgia and elsewhere, relations with Moscow could be repaired.

With regard to the PRC, Obama remained committed to ‘engagement’, but he was sufficiently worried about the meteoric growth of the Chinese economy to order a ‘pivot’ in US policy from the Middle East to Asia in November 2011. The hope of disengaging from the Middle East was not realised, as we shall see below. There was, however, a greater focus on China. The changing relationship was understood in terms of competition rather than enmity—as one of ‘geo-economics’ rather than geopolitics. As the new decade dawned there was no sign that Washington expected the return of classic Great Power rivalry in its relations with either Russia or the PRC. Moreover, the vaunted ‘pivot’ to Asia under Obama was more rhetorical than real.[16]

Americans took from this history a strong sense of their global status and national distinctiveness. The elite believed that the United States was vital to the functioning of the international system, and the wider population generally became convinced that the defence of their freedoms and interests warranted an extensive, and expensive, engagement with the outside world. There remained a strong ‘isolationist’ undertow, but the prevailing sentiment was made up of shades of internationalism. The United States

might step back, but it would inevitably be invited—or forced—to return to the fray. Some Americans felt that their segregationist history at home and imperialist record abroad made them unfit for global management. Most were convinced that the United States, for all its faults, was integrative at home and liberationist abroad.

When Barack Obama won his second term of office in late 2012, it was clear that the United States regarded itself as a Great Power. His election night speech promised ‘a nation that is defended by the strongest military on earth’ and spoke of the need to ‘remind the world just why it is that we live in the greatest nation on earth’. In the preface to his subsequent National Security Strategy, he simply stated that ‘America must lead’. In other words, insofar as Americans believed in the existence of Great Powers, the only really Great Power was the United States.[17]

The US elite certainly did not believe that it was operating within a Great Power system. Their main concern over the past two decades had been not peer competition but transnational threats, such as Islamist terrorism and homeland security; nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons proliferation; and nation building, economic inequality, food insecurity, and public health. Indeed, Obama’s first National Security Strategy in 2010 stated that ‘instead of a hostile expansionist empire, we now face a diverse array of challenges’. The document also noted that ‘major powers are at peace’, and vowed to ‘continue to deepen… cooperation’ with ‘centers of influence’ such as China, India, and Russia. It registered without obvious alarm that Russia had ‘re-emerged’ in the international arena and that ‘China and India—the world’s two most populous nations—are becoming more engaged globally’. None of the ‘Top National Security Priorities’ in the 2010 Strategy concerned the Great Powers. The 2015 National Security Strategy continued in the same vein and stressed that power ‘was shifting below and beyond the nation-state’.[18]

All this changed with the election of President Donald Trump in 2016. He came into office with a promise to rebalance America’s economic relationship with the rest of the world, and especially to halt the seemingly inexorable rise of China. The National Security Strategy of December 2017 was largely framed around the return of Great Power rivalry. Shortly after

its publication, Defense Secretary James Mattis announced that ‘Great Power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. National Security’. The National Security Strategy argued that the ‘revisionist powers of China and Russia’ as well as the rogue states of Iran and North Korea were ‘actively competing’ against the United States. The PRC, it continued, ‘seeks to displace the United States in the Indo-Pacific region’, while ‘Russia seeks to restore its great power status’ and poses an ‘existential threat to the United States’ through its military investment and especially its ‘nuclear systems’.[19]

The Trump administration cast itself as explicitly ‘realist’ in contradiction to what it regarded as the wooly internationalist idealism of Trump’s predecessors. It promised to recognise the ‘central role of power in international politics’, to vindicate ‘sovereign states’ as the ‘best hope for a peaceful world’, and to ‘clearly define’ America’s ‘national interests’. The National Security Strategy condemned what it saw as the ‘great degree of strategic complacency’ since the 1990s, which it said was based on the assumption ‘that our military superiority was guaranteed and that a democratic peace was inevitable’. It also scorned the belief that ‘liberal-democratic enlargement and inclusion would fundamentally alter the nature of international relations’ so that ‘competition would give way to peaceful cooperation’. Instead, it noted that ‘after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great power competition [had] returned’, with Russia and the PRC as America’s main adversaries.[20]

In particular, the Trump administration marked the final break with the already threadbare assumption that, as the strategy document put it, ‘support for China’s rise and for its integration into the post-war international order would liberalize China’. Instead, the PRC had ‘expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others’. The State Department’s Policy Planning Staff (PPS) elaborated on this sentiment in a lengthy 2020 report entitled *The Elements of the China Challenge*. This document argued that the Chinese Communist Party had ‘triggered a new era of great-power competition’, aiming ‘not merely at preeminence within the established world order’, but trying to create a new system which would place the PRC ‘at the center’, and thus serving ‘Beijing’s authoritarian goals and hegemonic ambitions’.[21]

The antagonism with the PRC went well beyond pure Great Power rivalry. According to the State Department's report, the Chinese Communist Party was promoting 'a theory of a global-spanning universal society' which was inimical to US sovereignty and democracy. Its ideology was condemned as 'neither strictly communist nor purely nationalist, but resolutely authoritarian, collectivist, and imperialist'.[22]

In short, the United States was now convinced that after a long period of dominance, it was only one of a number of Great Powers, albeit the most significant one, and that it lived in an era of Great Power competition. The post–Cold War period, according to H. R. McMaster, was a 'unipolar' world in which 'great power competition was passé', but by the time he became Donald Trump's national security advisor in 2017, 'great power competition was back with a vengeance'.[23]

This sentiment was echoed by the administration of Joe Biden which took office in 2021. Its October 2022 National Security Strategy noted at the outset that 'the post–Cold War era is definitively over' and that 'a competition is underway between the major powers to shape what comes next'. The report further stated that 'the most pressing strategic challenge' came from 'powers that layer authoritarian governance with a revisionist foreign policy'. Likewise, in the autumn of 2023, Biden's national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, stressed the importance of 'geopolitical competition' and the need for the United States to 'deter and respond to great-power aggression'.[24]

History continued to play an important role in Americans' conceptions of their special place in the world. This role had always been disputed, but the divisions became particularly acute during the Obama, Trump, and Biden presidencies. On the one side, there was an uplifting story of freedom defended at home and abroad. 'At home,' the Trump National Security Strategy of 2017 claimed, 'we fought the Civil War to end slavery and preserve our Union in the long struggle to extend equal rights to all Americans', while abroad the nation sacrificed hundreds of thousands to defeat Nazi and communist tyranny. On this reading, American history was an asset for and an inspiration to US Great Powerness.[25]

On the other side, there was a more complex picture, and increasingly one of outright condemnation. To Barack Obama, the American past was at

least a constraint on American action. ‘We have history’, he famously told one interviewer. ‘We have history in Iran, we have history in Indonesia and Central America. So we have to be mindful of our history when we start talking about intervening and understand the source of other people’s suspicions.’ To others, history was, quite simply, an obstacle. The 1619 Project inaugurated by the *New York Times* journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, for example, argued that the arrival of slaves in 1619 had maimed the American enterprise from the start, and the death of the African American George Floyd at the hands of US law enforcement officials in 2020 and similar cases were seen as further evidence of the nation’s innate rottenness. These claims were furiously rejected by critics. In short, the history and culture wars of the 2010s and 2020s were always also battles about the role that America played, or should play, in the world.[26]

The preoccupations of the United States at the global level after 2012 varied from one administration to the next. Presidents Obama and Biden tended to emphasise the defence of the ‘free, open, prosperous, and secure international order’, as the 2022 National Security Strategy put it. The two Trump administrations showed greater concern about gaining more favourable trading relations. Environmental questions, such as climate change, featured strongly in the Obama and Biden presidencies but not during the Trump years. There were, though, many things Biden and Trump had in common, such as protecting the US economy from what they regarded as unfair competition, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and addressing Russian and PRC challenges to American security.[27]

Throughout the 2010s and early 2020s, there was palpable concern that the United States was declining as a Great Power. Despite the strong economic performance of the country throughout this period (with the exception of the COVID crisis), and the poorer showing of many other economies, the domestic and foreign commentariat flooded the bookshops and news media with predictions of America’s fall from greatness. In April 2023, former US Treasury Secretary Larry Summers claimed that there was not only ‘a growing acceptance of [global] fragmentation’ but a ‘growing sense that ours may not be the best fragment to be associated with’.[28]

It was in this context that Washington began to worry about the security of both the sea-lanes and the vital resources being transported through them. The emerging tech economy and the quest for green solutions magnified these vulnerabilities, as they depended on the availability of semiconductors and critical metals, many of which were controlled by China. In November 2019, Trump's navy secretary, Richard Spencer, warned that the United States was engaged in 'great power competition' with its rivals and that Russia and China, in particular, were 'all of a sudden in [the] supply chain'. This sentiment was only strengthened by the experience of the COVID pandemic, when the PRC's near-stranglehold over the supply of personal protective equipment was suddenly evident.[29]

The United States was unique among the Great Powers in the extent to which it was engaged across the entire world. Of course, it was more invested in some areas than others. Right at the top was the Indo-Pacific region, partly because it was now the biggest engine of economic growth outside the United States, and partly because of the related question of how to manage the rise of Chinese power. The Biden administration defined the region as 'the epicenter of 21st century geopolitics', and the PRC as 'the only competitor with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to advance that objective'. It was the 'pacing challenge', militarily.[30]

China was feared not only for its hostility to the concept of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific'—endorsed by both the Trump and the Biden administrations—but also for the threat it posed in a number of separate but connected parts of the region. The PRC menaced Japan, periodically threatened to invade Taiwan, and was clearly trying to create facts on the ground, or rather, in the water, through the establishment of artificial islands in the South China Sea. It was also expanding its influence in the South Pacific, particularly in the Solomon Islands.

The second greatest area of concern was Europe, both because of its enduring, if waning, economic significance and on account of the danger posed by any radical breaches of the order there, such as Putin's invasion of Ukraine, to the global balance of power. The two spheres were seen as linked through the growing collusion between Beijing and Moscow. The Biden National Security Strategy of October 2022, for example, stated that

though they posed distinct challenges, ‘the PRC and Russia are increasingly aligned with each other’. Therefore, they needed to be dealt with simultaneously.[31]

In the rest of the world, the Middle East and South Asia featured strongly on the American radar, thanks to the legacy of the Global War on Terror. Repeated attempts to reduce the US focus on the region, in order to concentrate effort elsewhere, were complicated by ongoing events, such as the unexpected emergence of the ISIS caliphate in parts of Iraq and Syria in 2014, and the devastating Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023. All administrations sought to end, or at least mitigate, the Israel-Palestine conflict and were concerned about Iran acquiring a nuclear bomb.

Relatively little priority was given to Africa, which was largely seen as a humanitarian case or a terrorist risk, although there was growing concern about the Chinese economic and Russian military presence there. Latin America, which had been high on the agenda throughout the Cold War, was largely seen through the lens of market opportunities; the challenges of left-wing populism in Venezuela, Bolivia, and Ecuador; the trade in illegal narcotics; and, of course, illegal immigration. Even here, though, there was mounting concern about the growth of China’s economic power in a region once seen as America’s ‘backyard’.

All of these challenges were direct threats not merely to US interests worldwide but also to the security of the homeland. Chinese technology firms such as Huawei threatened the integrity of American communications systems, while TikTok seemed to jeopardise the mental health of its young people. More broadly, the PRC’s economic nationalism had eroded US prosperity, or was widely believed to have done so; it had certainly damaged American claims to global supremacy. Even Hank Paulson, treasury secretary under President George W. Bush and an avid supporter of ‘engagement’, was forced to admit, in November 2018, that seventeen years after having been admitted to the World Trade Organization, China had not truly opened to competition, or to allowing the transfer of intellectual property, or to lifting regulatory and other non-tariff barriers. As a result, China’s economic rise had hollowed out US manufacturing, and Chinese opioids had eviscerated whole communities, causing what President Trump, in his First Inaugural Speech, called ‘American carnage’. If China had been

forced by the British Empire to accept the import of foreign narcotics after the Opium Wars, it had won the First Opioid War against the new hegemon hands down.[32]

The connection between US economic decline and its Great Power status was well understood in Washington. Not only would a poorer America be less able to support its international interests, but the resulting domestic discontent would further weaken US global standing and facilitate manipulation by outside forces. ‘When we are consumed by partisan rancor,’ Trump’s former Russia expert Dr Fiona Hill warned, ‘we cannot combat external forces as they seek to divide us against each other, degrade our institutions, and destroy the faith of the American people in our democracy.’ She was speaking before President Trump baselessly alleged he had lost the November 2020 election to fraud, culminating in the storming of the Capitol by some of his supporters.[33]

The United States responded to this changing world with a combination of interlocking global and regional policies. Obama’s ‘pivot’ to Asia sought to counter the rising influence of the PRC without damaging the ever closer economic ties between the two countries. To this end, Washington sought to reassure partners in the region, especially Taiwan; stepped up efforts to contain Chinese penetration of the South China Sea; redeployed naval assets to the region; and stressed its commitment to international norms such as freedom of navigation. At the same time, Washington tried to persuade Beijing to become what it regarded as a ‘responsible stakeholder’ within the rules-based order. The centrepiece of the administration’s policy was supposed to be the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a trade agreement with twelve Pacific Rim countries including Japan, Vietnam, Singapore, and Canada, but excluding the PRC.

If Obama still favoured a combination of engagement and balancing, the first Trump administration moved towards a policy of full-scale containment with a cocktail of punitive tariffs, military spending increases, and the removal of Chinese tech providers, such as Huawei, from American communications systems. In October 2018, the Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act provided countries with alternative financing schemes to enable them to avoid being sucked into the

Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Trump also sanctioned PRC state-owned enterprises collaborating in expansionist activities in the South China Sea. TikTok was banned from use by members of the US Navy in late 2019, and in March 2020 from the US government. The Biden administration did not reverse these measures and in some respects even sharpened them. In a relatively short period of time, the idea that the PRC represented a threat to the United States had become a bipartisan consensus.[34]

At home, this policy was flanked by a focus on bringing production back to the United States. This effort was begun under the first Trump administration, continued under Biden, and stepped up by Trump after he returned to office in 2025. The motivation was partly domestic. Trump wanted to stop the erosion of US manufacturing jobs, and Biden sought to pursue what his national security advisor, Jake Sullivan, termed ‘a foreign policy for the middle class’ based on increasing employment opportunities and wages for American workers. The other driver was strategic, the objective being to secure vulnerable supply chains. With this in mind, the Biden administration brought in the CHIPS and Science Act (2022), designed to ensure that vital technology could be developed and produced within the continental United States (CHIPS stood for ‘Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors’).

If the PRC was the main target of American policy, Russia was also in Washington’s sights, partly as a threat in its own right and partly because of what was believed to be its collusion with Beijing. Obama was slow to respond to the threat from Russia, which he dismissed as a mere ‘regional’ power. When Putin annexed Crimea in 2014, the United States imposed sanctions on Russia but tried to avoid escalation, advising the Ukrainians not to fight for the peninsula. By contrast, the first Trump administration, despite the president’s evident personal admiration for Putin, greatly increased US troop and equipment deployments to Eastern Europe, sent the first lethal aid to Ukraine, and sanctioned companies working to bring Russian gas to Germany via the Nord Stream II Pipeline through the Baltic.

After Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Biden administration provided large-scale military support to Kiev, imposed sanctions on Moscow, and moved quickly to shut Russia as much as possible out of the international system—for example, in the banking sector. It also provided

critical intelligence to enable Ukrainian forces to target the Russian aggressors. What Washington failed to do was to provide enough help, quickly enough, to force Putin to withdraw. As a result, the Ukrainian counteroffensive of 2023 quickly ran out of steam. It appeared as if the United States wanted to degrade Russia as a Great Power but not knock it out altogether, fearful, perhaps, that the resulting vacuum might be filled by the PRC or a more radical Russian leader.

Despite initial hopes of disengaging from the Middle East, the Obama administration was forced to engage with the civil war in Syria, which was not only a humanitarian catastrophe but also threatened to destabilise the whole region through refugee flows and the provision of a safe haven for radical Islamists. In 2013, though, when the Assad regime used chemical weapons once again, Washington failed to follow through on the threatened retaliation. The United States then launched a large-scale coalition effort against ISIS in Iraq and parts of Syria beginning in 2014. A year later, in 2015, Obama—alongside the other permanent members of the Security Council, Germany and the EU—concluded an agreement with Tehran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), designed to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear bomb. Obama also ramped up counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan before realising these were a lost cause.

The Trump administration intensified the campaign against ISIS and brought it to a largely successful conclusion in 2019. It also unilaterally abandoned the JCPOA, which it regarded as insufficient to curb Iran's nuclear ambitions and as a vehicle for increasing its regional influence. Instead, Washington pursued a policy of 'maximum pressure' on Iran, squeezing it economically, politically, and even militarily. In 2020, in an attempt to break the deadlock in the Middle East, Washington brokered the Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. This deal was designed, among other things, to facilitate diplomatic normalisation between the contractants. From October 2023, the Biden administration provided extensive military support to Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza.

These policies were debated not just between the two main political parties and their respective administrations, but also within them. There was a substantial constituency among both the Democrats and the Republicans in government, in academe, and indeed in the wider public which wanted

the United States to take a step back from active Great Power politics and devote more attention to domestic problems. Many Democrats were deeply critical of Israel, however, while many Republicans would not hear a word against it. The two parties differed only by degrees with respect to China.[35]

The biggest disagreement was over Russia. Among Democrats, from the 2010s into the early 2020s, Obama's relative insouciance gave way to Biden's hawkishness. Meanwhile, the Republican Party and Trump administrations appeared to be deeply conflicted. Some, such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the first Trump administration, were determined to contain both Putin and Xi. Trump's assistant secretary of state for Europe and Eurasia, A. Wess Mitchell, even articulated a 'Europe-first strategy'—that is, a pivot away from Asia and back to Europe. Others, such as Assistant Secretary for Defense Elbridge Colby, did not deny the threat posed by Moscow but insisted that all efforts be concentrated on the greater challenge from Beijing. Only a small number, such as Steve Bannon, who was briefly chief strategist and senior counselor to the president, and Trump's short-lived first national security advisor, Mike Flynn, recommended an alliance with Putin against Xi—'a reverse Nixon'—and were prepared to sacrifice Ukraine to this end. At the congressional level, the Republican ambivalence about Russia expressed itself in delays in approving the later military aid packages for Ukraine in late 2023 and early 2024, though some of this was just political manoeuvering to embarrass the Biden administration.[36]

The battle within the Republican Party over Russia continued through 2024 and into 2025. On the one hand, few of those recommended for senior positions in the second Trump administration, and still fewer of those who survived the vetting process, were sympathetic to Russia. Both the secretary of state, Marco Rubio, and the first national security advisor, Mike Waltz, were staunch advocates of defending Europe against Moscow's ambitions. The policy might be 'China First', but there was no sustained view that Russia should therefore be appeased. In fact, these Republicans believed that a victory for Putin in Ukraine would be a victory for Xi and might embolden him to attack Taiwan.[37]

On the other hand, Trump's right-wing 'base'; many of his media supporters, such as Tucker Carlson; and some of the new appointees,

including director of national intelligence Tulsi Gabbard, were strongly sympathetic to Russia. The president himself seemed to oscillate between admiration and respect for Putin and a fear that the Russian leader was manipulating him. Be that as it may, in 2025, despite serious initial tensions with Kiev, the second Trump administration did not immediately abandon Ukraine but instead increased the economic pressure on Moscow, with the imposition of punitive measures against countries, such as India, that purchased Russian oil at a discount.

The resources which the United States can deploy in support of its Great Power ambitions are colossal. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, the country had enjoyed the highest GDP in the world for about a century and a half. America was completely self-sufficient in energy—if it wanted to be—and most natural resources, as well as foodstuffs. It was the world's greatest spender on foreign aid, at least until the massive cuts at the start of the second Trump administration, and by far and away the most substantial provider of military assistance to Ukraine. Right at the top of this list of superlatives is US defence expenditure, which by the mid-2020s had declined in relative importance compared to other powers since the turn of the millennium, but was still undeniably the highest in the world—bigger than the next ten powers combined—amounting to an extraordinary 37 percent of the world total in dollar terms. This budget funds the most powerful military forces in the world, with capabilities ranging from nuclear and outer space to niche special forces units on the ground.[38]

America also enjoys unparalleled reach across the world at every level. US bases and deployments—about 750 overseas in 2021—are spread around the globe, from Latin America to Europe, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, the Korean Peninsula, and the Pacific. This presence supports and is supported by an exceptional web of alliances—from NATO and AUKUS to dozens of bespoke multilateral and bilateral agreements. One observer, speaking only of Asia, described these alliances as an American 'tributary system', but the phrase could be applied more widely. To be sure, the arrangements are not without their critics, at home and abroad, who lament their costs and impact on the environment as well as on local communities and their role in other problems. For example, in his 'Letter to

America' of November 2002, the Islamist terrorist leader Osama bin Laden accused the United States of 'spreading' bases 'throughout' the world, 'occupying' lands, and violating holy places. It is certainly true that there have been cases, such as at Okinawa, where bases face significant local opposition. Still, if America's global presence can be described as 'imperial', it has mostly been, as one observer put it, 'an empire by invitation'.[39]

The United States supplements this reach with its remarkable ability to shape the global commons. At the United Nations, Washington enjoys veto power as a permanent member of the Security Council. Economically, the United States plays a major role in international institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. While some of this power is long-standing, some of it is of recent vintage and actually growing, such as the vast American 'underground empire' of intellectual property, fibre-optic cables, supply chains, and financial plumbing. This mostly emerged out of the quest for surveillance and prevention after the terrorist attacks of September 2001. Most of the world's internet traffic still crosses US servers and is liable to interception and interruption. The two largest stock markets in the world, the New York Stock Exchange and the NASDAQ, are based in the United States. As a result, US financial and economic sanctions are feared the world over.[40]

Perhaps the strongest US card here, though, is its control of the dollar, which is the main international means of transaction, the principal global reserve currency, and the most widely held 'safe asset'. Everybody wants dollars, including the Chinese government, which held $1.113 trillion worth of Treasury bonds in 2019. All this keeps US interest rates low, makes huge US government deficits possible, and helps ordinary Americans to buy houses and goods more cheaply. Many years ago, French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing referred to this phenomenon as America's 'exorbitant privilege'. In short, the fact that the United States controls most of the world's communication networks, most of its banking system, and the world's international currency, the dollar—in which most trades, especially in oil, are denominated—gives Washington a unique ability to 'unplug' rivals from the world system.[41]

In addition to all these strengths, and to some extent because of them, the United States enjoys an outsize reputation as a Great Power. American popular culture and soft power—its ability to make others want what it wants—are still second to none in the world. The transcendent image of the United States as the vindicator of democracy globally is still powerful. Global surveys and polls routinely show America with very high approval ratings in some countries, including Israel and Poland, while enthusiasm is much lower in others, such as Hungary and Malaysia. The United States has long been regarded as a reliable partner by both elites and by about three-quarters of the world population, though what impact the second Trump administration will have in this respect remains to be seen.[42]

Belief in America's reliability is not universal, of course, and it also fluctuates. The Obama administration's failure to enforce its red lines in Syria undermined US standing in the world. So did the tone and unilateralism of Donald Trump during his first administration, albeit in a different way. Joe Biden's precipitate retreat from Afghanistan damaged US standing with both governments and their publics. There was also a widespread sense among some, abroad and at home, that American society and democracy were in crisis. The Charlottesville Unite the Right rally, the Black Lives Matter protests, the push to overturn the 2020 presidential election result, the assassination attempt on Donald Trump in July 2024, and much else were cited in evidence. One British journalist even argued that the 'melting pot' had become a 'toxic stew' and that the 'beacon' had become a 'dumpster fire'.[43]

The most remarkable feature of America as a Great Power, though, has been its resilience. Things have not always gone Washington's way, and yet on each occasion, the country has reinvented itself and recovered. This was the case both after the Civil War, when the country embarked on its unprecedented rise, and after the Great Depression, when it became a truly global hegemon. It happened again after the Vietnam War, when the humiliating scuttle from Saigon seemed to inaugurate a worldwide retreat, but America rallied to see the collapse of the Soviet Bloc before the subsequent decade was out. 'The twentieth century was the American century,' predicted the research director of the Tokyo Institute for International Policy Studies, Seizaburo Sato, before the fall of the Berlin

Wall. And, he added, ‘the twenty-first century will be the American century’. Nearly forty years on, in a time of increasing global fragility, the United States is still in very good health, at least in Great Power terms.[44]

At the start of the 2020s, the outlook for the United States was widely considered to be clouded. Emerging bruised from the pandemic, the bitterly contested presidential election, and the Capitol riots, and faced with an ever more confident Sino-Russian axis, America appeared more embattled than at any point since the Cold War. By the middle of the decade, though, with the resurgence of the US economy, largely driven by the growth of the technology sector, the travails of China and the European Union, and Russia’s struggles in Ukraine, the picture looked rather different. If the United States is no longer the only Great Power, as it had been for the first two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is still by some margin the greatest of the Great Powers.

Part IV

THE FUTURE OF THE GREAT POWERS

Fourteen

The Global Futures of the Great Powers

TWENTY YEARS AGO, the Great Powers were widely believed to have no future. Today, the Great Powers *are* the future. We will explore what may come next at two intertwined levels, first the global, and then, in the following chapter, the regional. These two futures, by their very nature, are open. Some—or perhaps even most—of what lies ahead will catch us unawares. It may be that the rising power of the 'rest' will displace that of the 'West', that India and China will resume the powerful position they enjoyed before they were displaced by European imperialism, at least in their wider neighbourhoods. Alternatively, the Western order may survive more or less intact, either as a rules-based system or as a cartel of major powers led by the United States. The only thing that seems clear is that our world will continue to be dominated by a small number of powerful states, the Great Powers.

Making predictions, the great Yogi Berra tells us, is difficult, 'especially about the future'. Attempting to predict the future of the Great Powers, as even a cursory glance at the past reveals, thus seems foolhardy, and it is. Despite our constant efforts to anticipate events, we are constantly being surprised. Twenty years ago, who would have foreseen Brexit, Trump, the COVID pandemic, Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or the deployment of North Korean troops to Europe? Who expected that the American position in Afghanistan would collapse so quickly? Who predicted the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel? Certainly not US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who shortly beforehand hailed the Middle East as a region 'quieter than it had been for two decades'. There are therefore two things one should never say about geopolitics. The first is:

‘*That* will never happen’; the second is: ‘He (or she) would never do anything as stupid as *that*’. We cannot predict the future, but by reflecting on the past and ruminating on what might be in store for us, we can at least expect to be surprised.[1]

As we have seen throughout this book, history is extremely important, but it is by no means the sole determinant of geopolitics. If it were, the future would be entirely predictable. In fact, the past never repeats itself exactly but returns in different forms, either—as Karl Marx coined it—first as tragedy, then farce, or in some other guise. We are neither going ‘back to the future’, as Hollywood once had it, nor ‘forward to the past’. But if history is not an infallible predictor, it can sharpen our sense of what the protagonists desire or fear, and thus our understanding of what is possible.

The Great Powers bring to the future the ambitions and anxieties of the past. Russia will probably seek to vindicate its position and identity at the expense of its neighbours, citing its historical claims to greatness and its past vulnerability to attack. Here indeed, as the Russian dissident writer Masha Gessen memorably put it, ‘the future is history’. India and the People’s Republic of China will most likely strive to continue their return to the status they enjoyed before the onset of Western hegemony; China will surely try to regain Taiwan, either peacefully or through the use of force. The French can be expected to pursue the *grandeur* they believe was bequeathed to them by history. Likewise, the United States, and, in a more limited way, the United Kingdom, will probably continue their long-standing ordering roles in the world. By contrast, Japan, Germany, and, to a certain extent, the European Union will struggle to transcend the constraints placed upon them by the past.[2]

In this context, shifts in historical interpretation among the Great Powers, which are often manufactured, or at least encouraged, by regimes, will prefigure changes in their behaviour, especially among the autocracies. As the Harvard historian Rana Mitter pointed out, ‘China’s expanding role in the twenty-first century rests on a reimagining of the twentieth’. The recent Chinese claim to have been present at the creation of the international order after the Second World War underpins the PRC’s demands for recognition today. Official re-interpretations of history are most marked in dictatorships, especially communist ones; Soviet historians

used to complain of their difficulty in predicting the past. But even in democracies, shifting views of the past matter intensely. In the United States, for example, the victory of either the ‘1619 Project’, which emphasises the alleged foundational racism of America, and thus deprives the country of its traditional moral mandate for action abroad, or that of the (in most other respects completely antithetical) isolationist ‘1939 Project’, would portend Washington’s withdrawal from its traditional internationalist engagement with the world.[3]

The Great Powers, of course, are not the whole world. Mankind as a whole faces several critical challenges which transcend and nullify state boundaries, and which cannot be resolved by national governments alone. Climate change threatens to dry out rivers, to flood large areas of low-lying land, and to aggravate resource scarcity. Concurrently, thanks to continuing economic growth, our demand for energy—which unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, includes fossil fuels—has never been greater. The much-heralded green technologies require extensive mining for the necessary critical minerals to produce electric batteries and cars as well as advanced chips and modern data centers.

At the same time, we are seeing various demographic shifts. Overpopulation in a number of countries in the Global South is putting ever-increasing strain on already scarce resources. This problem contrasts with (but by no means offsets) demographic trends in key developed states such as Japan, where birthrates have been steadily falling for decades, risking the eventual extinction of their populations. These intrastate demographic challenges are exacerbated by interstate ones such as mass migration, which threatens to hollow out some societies while overwhelming others. Relatedly, populist movements of the left and right, which give vent to frustration with established parties, are growing across the globe. Authoritarianism appears to be on the rise.[4]

Finally, the world is in the grip of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, with rapid technological advances which synergise the biological and physical worlds. Artificial intelligence (AI) requires ever more computing power and energy, a reality which threatens existing energy reserves. There is also concern that huge tech corporations—some of them wealthier than sovereign countries—could make states and the whole state system

redundant in their quest for data, energy, and profit. AI also injects an additional element of uncertainty into the world order—for example, with respect to nuclear deterrence—by potentially taking decisions out of human hands altogether. Some even fear that AI might create an omnipotent entity beyond human control, a horrifying vision which carries with it serious ethical implications for the human race and international governance. Others see the biggest dangers in human misuse of the technology. The more optimistic among us hope that the new technology can be used, perhaps through a Sino-American partnership, to tackle global challenges collectively.[5]

In fact, all these trends, rather than simply acting as exogenous factors, will instead both profoundly shape and be shaped by Great Power rivalry. The PRC has embraced the green agenda both in order to claim global market share of environmental technologies and out of stark self-interest. Its low-lying coastal areas, which contain most of the country's economic potential, are very vulnerable to rising sea levels caused by global warming. Russia, by contrast, sees climate change as a geopolitical opportunity which opens up huge areas, including previously closed areas of the Arctic, to commerce and resource extraction.

The global ambition to reach 'net zero'—the commitments to achieve an overall end to greenhouse gas emissions by the year 2050—is already faltering as a result of the determination of Western countries to eliminate Chinese electric vehicles and batteries from their supply chains. The same is likely to happen to PRC solar panels and wind turbines, many of which are produced by forced labour in Xinjiang. This means that Western states may have to accept less progress on the green transition in order to contain China; it may also lead to the emergence of a pro-Beijing domestic constituency in those polities which privilege the environment over ideology and geopolitics.[6]

Likewise, demographic shifts will almost certainly be refracted through the prism of geopolitics. It is true that we face a global 'birth gap', an overall slowing in population increase with dire implications for the viability of the world economy and care for the elderly. It is also the case that this trend will disproportionately affect some of the major powers and their capacity to continue acting as Great Powers. Japan, Russia, and the

PRC are all projected to continue their demographic decline. The Great Powers that address the demographic question the most effectively will have the best chances of surviving as Great Powers in the decades to come.

Moreover, the impact of the Great Powers on the development of AI will probably be as great as the reverse. It is conceivable that this new technology will act as a great leveller, allowing smaller, nimbler states and substate actors to take on larger competitors. It is more likely, though, and consistent with current trends, that the effect of AI will be to concentrate ever more power in the hands of a small number of states, probably the United States, the PRC, and one or two others. Only they command the necessary funds, data pools, and computing power to make use of these opportunities. New technology may well tip the balance between the protagonists, as it often has in the past, but it will not fundamentally change the dynamic of Great Power politics. Indeed, it could transform the post–Cold War technological 'flatness' into a topography of summits and troughs that will look instantly familiar to any student of the classical balance of power.[7]

If there is a new departure, it might lie in the sphere of international cooperation—or rather, the likely lack of it. To be sure, there have been serious attempts at regulating AI, such as the UK-led AI Safety Summit at Bletchley in 2023. There have also been various international efforts, such as China's Global AI Governance Initiative, and UNESCO's AI Ethics Framework. But unlike earlier arms races—for example, the nuclear one between the United States and the Soviet Union—there is very little meaningful scope for limitation over the development and use of artificial intelligence. A Cold War SALT-style regulative agreement is impossible. The problems posed by verification and dual use are simply too great. The most likely outcome, therefore, is either an AI-driven supremacy of one power, or, as happened so often in the past with other new developments, the establishment of an AI equilibrium.

Likewise, outer space—which many had hoped could be managed collaboratively—will almost certainly become a major area of Great Power contestation. Indeed, it already is, as the salience of Starlink satellites in the Ukraine war and the establishment of a US Space Force suggests. The geopolitical future of the world's oceans is also unclear. These form part of

the global commons of sea-lanes and undersea communications. Historically, they were controlled by the Royal Navy and then the US Navy. If American hegemony fades, the oceans will become contested again. This could lead to a quasi-anarchic situation on the high seas and in coastal areas. Piracy, which is already a major problem in parts of Africa and the Singapore Strait, could increase exponentially and may be supported by state actors to damage rivals. The Great Powers will probably also clash with each other and with local actors when trying to conduct deep-sea mining operations outside their respective exclusive economic zones.[8]

The rise and fall of Great Powers will partly be determined by economics, partly by culture, and partly by geopolitics. If present trends persist, the economies of the United States, China, India, and much of the Global South will continue to grow, while those of the European Union, the United Kingdom, and Japan will continue to stagnate. With the pace of growth of China, India, and Indonesia, three of the five largest economies in the world are projected to be in Asia by the middle of the twenty-first century. BRICS countries, originally Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, have been joined by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia, and the group may expand further in the future. Driven by narratives of trauma, resentment, and development, they are described by some as ‘anti-Western’; in any case, they are likely to renew their demands for a more ‘democratic’ global order, meaning a redistribution of power away from the West. Indeed, some of the major actors in the developing world, such as Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, and Pakistan, could emerge as Great Powers in their own right. It is therefore possible that the next few decades will see a global shift of power, both geographically and politically, from West to East.[9]

All of this has led to a crisis of confidence in Western power and in the West more generally, sometimes dubbed ‘westlessness’. The press and think tanks in Washington, London, and other centres are awash with predictions of the decline of US power, the increasing irrelevance of Europe, and democratic ‘backsliding’. A 2023 report published by the Munich Security Conference showed that about twice as many Chinese and Indians believed that their countries would be richer and more secure in ten years’ time than

was the case for Americans. That figure jumped to four times as many by comparison with Italians, Germans, French, and Canadians. The British were only slightly more optimistic. Some foresee a ‘post-Western era’; indeed, some believe that it has already begun.[10]

The triumph of the East over the West, though, is far from inevitable. Unlike the West, the East is not a meaningful geopolitical concept. As the former Portuguese Europe Minister Bruno Maçães has pointed out, talk of an ‘Asian century’ or a new ‘Asian world order’ does not take into account the fact that the continent is deeply divided. For example, India and China, two founding members of the BRICS, have repeatedly come to blows in the recent past and are likely to do so again. Vietnam may lean towards Russia, but it is deeply suspicious of the PRC. The continent’s second most important economic power, Japan, is firmly in the Western camp.[11]

It is also far from clear that the Chinese economy, which has recently slowed, will carry on growing even at a more modest pace. Indeed, the decoupling of the PRC from the Western part of the world economy desired by some in the Trump administration would—if accomplished—require a revision of the widespread belief in China’s inexorable rise. That belief is largely based on the assumption of continued economic ‘globalisation’. In a conflict scenario, though, things would be completely different. Just as the massive cumulative peacetime GDPs of the areas controlled by the German Reich during the First and Second World Wars bore little resemblance to their reduced state under the British blockades, it is not obvious what the Chinese economy will look like with radically reduced access to Western markets, raw materials, and foodstuffs. Fear of such a scenario is widespread in Beijing.[12]

A great deal will depend on developments in the world economy. Will it continue to deglobalise, albeit slowly, as international trade and exchange falls further under the onslaught of the Trump tariffs and decoupling from China? Or does the new surge of trade deals concluded in the mid-2020s portend a new phase of global economic growth? Perhaps most importantly, can the global economy grow if Russia remains sanctioned and the PRC is decoupled, or is the establishment of a geopolitical modus vivendi the precondition for a new boom?[13]

It is also not obvious how the reputations of the Great Powers will develop. Will the evisceration of the US foreign aid budget by the Trump administration inflict lasting harm on American soft power, or will it facilitate a new, more equal relationship with the Global South? Will Russia's war of aggression brand it with the mark of Cain for the foreseeable future, or will much of the world scramble to return to business as usual as quickly as it decently (or indecently) can? Will the PRC be able to cast off its repressive reputation and present itself instead globally as the avatar of the green transition?

The future global order could thus take many shapes. Whether there will be a hegemon playing a role comparable to that played by the United States after the end of the Cold War is doubtful. America will remain immensely powerful, but its ability and willingness to act in this way seems increasingly debatable. If President Trump's approach persists, it is more likely that the United States will build a traditional Chinese-style tributary system which will extend to much of the globe—especially Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and parts of Asia—but by no means all of it. The only other power which might conceivably act as a hegemon is the PRC, but it is and always has been ideologically opposed to any such role, which requires the provision of global public goods, such as the safety of the sea-lanes, in return for the recognition of supremacy.

A revived liberal international system based on the broadly shared management of climate change, migration, and the global economy also seems unlikely. Indeed, much of the world—including Donald Trump, Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, and virtually the entire Global South—never accepted that the liberal international system existed in the first place, or at least refused to accept its claims at face value. The very concept of 'order', former Indian Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon argued, is a Western construct originating in British imperialism. Even in the rump, non-American West, which includes the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, Canada, and Australia, the net-zero agenda, which saw its heyday before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has receded in the face of more pressing geopolitical challenges.

The establishment of an illiberal Great Power cartel, on the other hand, is possible, and was actually attempted by the Trump administration in early 2025. Trump seeks economic deals to relocate factories back to the United

States, while Xi wants to go down in history as the ‘good emperor’ who united China by securing Taiwan, and Putin hopes to re-establish Russia as a Great Power. It is conceivable that all three men could reach a deal which involved economic concessions by the PRC to the United States; Trump abandoning Taiwan but absorbing Greenland, Canada, and the Panama Canal; and Russia being left in control of much of Ukraine. Russia and America might also collaborate to protect Christians in the Middle East and Africa, and perhaps to limit the Iranian nuclear programme. Any such arrangement would mark the end of the old Anglo-American, now Western universalist, world system and a return to traditional balance-of-power politics. In the words of John Raine, senior advisor for geopolitical due diligence at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, it would complete the shift from a ‘rules-based’ to a purely transactional ‘deals-based’ order.[14]

There are good reasons, though, to be sceptical that any such accommodation can be reached or be made to hold. Unlike similar rapprochements in the past, such as Nixon’s legendary opening to China, there is no common enemy that the PRC and the United States can unite against. Likewise, Russia does not consider the PRC an adversary and will not abandon Beijing for Washington. Besides, a Russo-American *renversement des alliances* at Europe’s expense might drive Brussels, and perhaps even London, to seek an understanding with Beijing. Finally, the trust necessary to achieve such a ‘grand bargain’ is in short supply, and the vagaries of the US electoral system would cause Beijing to fear that any deal might be unpicked by a new administration.[15]

A more probable outcome is the emergence of a multipolar order in which the different power centres would be, if not equidistant from each other, then recognisably distinct. These would include the United States, the PRC, Russia, India, the European Union, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Japan and the United Kingdom might combine with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Taiwan to form a Western pole that is separate from the United States. This would comprise about 300 million people, making up a much larger population than Russia’s and one not much smaller than that of the United States. Unlike a Great Power cartel, the various poles might find

temporary accommodations, or form alliances, but the nature of the system would be fundamentally competitive.

A global Great Power cartel or multipolar system could function without any mainland European involvement, which would render that part of the continent a vacuum to be contested by the United Kingdom, Russia, and possibly the United States. For the mainland Europeans to join the ranks of the Great Powers in whatever form, they will have to cohere either as a political union or as a confederation of larger member states led by France or Germany. This means acquiring a military spine, which is at present supplied by the Americans. If Trump pulls US forces out of Europe, the continent, as the former Deputy Chief of the UK Defence Staff Douglas Chalmers has warned, risks becoming invertebrate.

Under such a Great Power system, each bloc would form a large enough entity to constitute a viable market. In most cases it would also be autarchic in terms of foodstuffs and energy, if not critical minerals. The exception today would be the PRC, which is still heavily dependent on oil and gas imports but is making great strides in reducing these through the development of green technologies such as electric vehicles. Ideologically, the system would be as heterogeneous as it is today, with democracies in some of the blocs and dictatorships or hybrid forms of government in others. No two sets of governmental arrangements would be alike, and so the Great Power order would tend, as it generally has, towards the preservation of global diversity of political systems.

Such a structure of international power would be a marked departure from the liberal order based on the current institutions of global governance. The United Nations General Assembly and international law would be sidelined. Instead, the future would be decided, as the former EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Catherine Ashton recently warned, by ‘great power deals not international law’. The running of the world would largely devolve to those of the five permanent Security Council members capable of wielding global influence and any new actors powerful enough to vindicate their claims. If this new Great Power order proved durable, the structure of international governance would evolve accordingly—for example, by finding a Security Council seat

for India, or establishing a new structure which better reflected global power-political realities.[16]

It is possible that instead of a multipolar system, a restored bipolar system will look more likely after the end of the Trump era. This would once again group the United States, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Japan, and various smaller allies in a single Western democratic order. This might be economically heterogeneous with several different regulatory systems, but it would be geopolitically coherent. Its principal adversary would be the autocratic Eastern order made up of China, Russia, and their allies. The regimes in the latter grouping would be quite diverse, including theocracy in Iran, clerical-nationalist kleptocracy in Russia, and communist dictatorship in China and North Korea.

The election of either a Democratic or Republican internationalist president in 2028 would not guarantee a return to the ‘globalised’ world of 2010. President Biden did not reverse Trump’s China tariffs after 2020; he continued the protectionist trend with the introduction of the Inflation Reduction and CHIPS Acts. The successors to the second Trump administration, whoever they may be, Republican or Democrat, may slow the speed of travel away from globalisation towards more protectionist policies, but they are unlikely to change the underlying direction of travel. Besides, even if subsequent US governments were to break with Trump’s legacy, the relationships he will have broken may not be easily repaired. Bridges, once burnt, require more than good intentions to rebuild.

It is therefore probable that the great economic decoupling between the United States and the PRC will not only deepen bilaterally but go on to embrace ever greater parts of the world. Trump has already abandoned the Biden-era distinction between a clearly defined area of non-cooperation and a much wider space of continued trade. But even if it is resumed under a subsequent US administration, it will prove impossible to maintain in practice—first, because of the nature of the world economy itself, which is increasingly driven by the sensitive technological advances which the West does not want to share with the PRC (and other systemic rivals); and second, because, while the process of decoupling was started by the West, it will be completed by the PRC as it seeks to mitigate its own vulnerabilities.

In short, economic globalisation and its associated full-scale interdependence were only possible in the unique conditions of post–Cold War, US-led unipolarity (or, if one prefers, the liberal international order). It cannot survive the return of the Great Powers. This is because, as the writer and former State Department official Edward Fishman's trilemma has it, Washington, Beijing, Brussels, London, Tokyo, New Delhi, and Moscow know that you can only have two of the following three: economic interdependence, economic security, and geopolitical competition. Economic interdependence and economic security are only compatible in an age of geopolitical cooperation; economic security and geopolitical competition can only be managed by avoiding interdependence; and though a state can choose to remain economically interdependent in the face of geopolitical rivalry, it will thereby make itself economically insecure.[17]

While the Great Powers have developed fairly distinct profiles over the past few decades, or even longer, their orientations and affinities should not be regarded as completely fixed. Domestic cultural, demographic, and political changes could lead to significant geopolitical shifts, perhaps quite suddenly. Elections in the United States, the United Kingdom, or the European Union could pull these polities in completely new directions. If the far right gains further ground in Europe, the continent might abandon Ukraine in favour of Russia. By contrast, the return of Britain to the European Union following a successful election or referendum campaign, though unlikely, cannot be ruled out.

Personalities also matter. We live in an age of outsize global figures such as Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Narendra Modi. Their decisions will shape the world for decades to come. While each of them is subject to varying domestic restraints, it is not clear that, were Xi or Putin, for example, to give an order likely to precipitate World War III, anybody inside their own countries would be willing or able to stop them.

In the democratic world, the biggest variable is the United States. Trump's election changed the future: Under Biden, America had been on one path, now it is on another. The short-term outlook is clouded by the president's unpredictability. At the moment, he seems to be swinging back towards a more traditional American position over Europe, but we cannot

be sure of his intentions, and he wants it that way. Over time, the increasing number of citizens of non-European heritage in the United States may lead to a realignment with regard to NATO, Israel, and other long-standing allies. The election of the radical leftist Zohran Mamdani, who has called for the ‘globalisation’ of the resistance against Israel, as mayor of New York may be a straw in the wind here, foreshadowing future trends.

The greatest volatility, though, will probably be found in the autocracies. This is partly because their governance systems could make them more susceptible to moves with incalculable outcomes, such as an attack by Putin on a NATO country, or an invasion of Taiwan ordered by Xi. It is also because dictatorships, which lack mechanisms for an orderly transition, seem stable until they suddenly are not. A palace coup or popular revolution in Russia or the People’s Republic of China could bring about a realignment overnight, either facilitating a rapprochement with the West or precipitating a complete breakdown in relations.

Some powers may unexpectedly disappear, as the Soviet Union did. None of the major actors are completely immune to this danger. Rather than being straightforward unitary nation-states, America, Russia, China, India, Britain, and the EU are all either unions, empires, or confederations. They are all vulnerable to disintegrative forces—at least if history is anything to go by.

The United Kingdom could face a serious challenge from Scottish and Irish nationalists. Russia could once again experience the fragmentation it has suffered in the recent past. China might be wracked by severe internal divisions, between maritime and interior provinces, and between ethnically distinct regions like Xinjiang and the central government. India could face similar problems, Kashmir being the most extreme example. The European Union could dissolve. Even the United States is at risk of imploding—for example, if Donald Trump were to attempt to run for a third term, or if either side were to contest the outcome of the next presidential election.

The global encounter between the Great Powers may take many different forms. Their contestation will involve the clash of ‘narratives’ and ‘stories’ in cyberspace as the powers seek to weaponise competing claims about ‘democracy’, the ‘rule of law’, and ‘inequality’. There will be cyberattacks

on rival critical infrastructure and intellectual property. The Great Powers will battle for markets and for regulatory dominance over the right to set rules and standards. In the physical world, the Great Powers will face off over access to foodstuffs, energy supplies, critical metals to power the green transition, and other raw materials. They will also seek to ‘reshore’, or at least ‘friend shore’, key manufacturing capacities and supply chains. This would still be a ‘globalised’ world, of sorts, just not as we once knew it.[18]

Russian and Chinese attempts to construct a BRICS-style alternative to the Western order will dominate geopolitics at the global level. They could try to establish a reserve currency to challenge the dollar, for example. Both powers will also continue to try to divide Western societies domestically. They are likely to succeed in several respects but to fail overall. If American ‘populists’ of most stripes are susceptible to Russian blandishments, those on the right are even more anti-Chinese than the mainstream. If German, French, and Hungarian populists tend to be both pro-Russian and pro-Chinese, those in Poland and the Nordic states are not. In the United Kingdom, neither Russia nor the PRC has much political traction outside the extremes. That said, even if they fail to convert Western publics to the Russian or Chinese point of view, such influence operations could well succeed in setting Western societies against each other.

Likewise, the Russo-Chinese axis may be able to mine a rich seam of anti-Western resentment among the states of what it calls the ‘global majority’, but it will struggle to persuade key actors to align with them against the West on a permanent basis. India, for example, is a Russian ally, but closer to the United States than to China, which it fears and detests. The ‘rest’ is geopolitically far more divided than the ‘West’. Most of the ‘rest’ would also think twice about being shut out of the global system in terms of trade, dollar access, and educational opportunities. Politically and emotionally, the world may divide into Western and anti-Western camps, but geopolitically some non-Western powers will ultimately align with the West or attempt to remain neutral.

There is a question mark over how much the Western allies will rally under pressure, especially that exerted by the Trump administration, but it is much smaller than the cloud of doubt which hangs over the connection between the challenger powers. They have a much thinner latticework of

economic, political, and military cooperation. It is quite possible that having taken the plunge against the West, Xi or Putin might suddenly find himself alone, just as Iran did when it was attacked by Israel and the United States in 2025.

One way or the other, we may see a very different global economic order than the one which has emerged over the past twenty years. If so, trade will be largely within rather than across ‘orders’ (that is, across national borders within geopolitical orders). Progressively cut off from its principal markets and sources of raw materials, the Chinese economy may fall behind that of America and its allies. It remains to be seen whether India, which will surely continue to straddle the orders, would be able to move into the gap. The already inadequate international collaboration to combat climate change, water shortages, and other global challenges will shrink. Indeed, Great Power politics will not only cut across such collaboration but aggravate these challenges and in turn be aggravated by them. Migration flows driven by political instability or economic inequality will continue to be manipulated—for example, by Russia—to undermine rivals. The quest for critical metals to power the green transition will also remain a matter of deep contention among the major actors. In the face of all this, the will to support such a transition may finally crumble, exacerbating the resource and climate crisis.

If it can safely be assumed that the future will be dominated by Great Power competition, that does not mean that global war is inevitable. Historically, there is no obvious link between world order and peace. To be sure, unipolarity, or attempted unipolarity, tends to produce a reaction culminating in war—for example, in the case of Napoleon, and with Hitler’s European ambitions—but the past also knows long periods of hegemonic peace, such as the twenty-five years following the fall of communism. Economically, the catastrophe of the First World War struck at a time when global trading links had never been closer, while the outbreak of the Second World War shows that the quest for autarchy does not necessarily lead to peace either.

The world is not yet at war, but it is engaged in a global proxy conflict. This is most obvious in Ukraine, where NATO is supporting Ukraine

against Russia, which in turn is being backed by North Korea, by Iran, and —at least economically—by the People's Republic of China. On the other side of the world, the situation remains tense in the Taiwan Strait and in the South China Sea. It is clear that the outcomes in both Europe and Asia will have profound implications for the future. The next chapter addresses the regional consequences.

Globally, a Putin victory in Ukraine would damage the West, embolden Russia and China, and deal a heavy—and possibly irreversible—blow to international law. It would probably also wreck the nuclear non-proliferation regime beyond repair. In 1994, Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in return for guarantees of its territorial integrity from the Great Powers, including Russia, which later flagrantly broke its word. In 2022, Russia threatened to use nuclear weapons against any power intervening against its war of aggression, and against any attempt by Kiev to recover lands annexed by the Kremlin.

The consequences of this will be far-reaching. Countries in the Global South believe that Ukraine would not have been attacked if it had still possessed nuclear weapons, and they are therefore likely to step up their attempts to acquire an atomic bomb. Britain has already announced its intention to increase its number of nuclear warheads for the first time since the end of the Cold War, and it will probably continue to do so and to diversify the number of platforms capable of delivering them. Likewise, the PRC, which is not and never has been part of any nuclear limitation agreement, has recently grown its stockpile faster than any other power, admittedly from a relatively low base. It is projected to continue doing so in years to come, to 1,500 warheads by 2035, as much to balance Russia as to contain the West, one suspects. One way or the other, we are likely to see a greatly enhanced emphasis on nuclear weapons in Great Power politics in the decades ahead.

In short, it is unlikely that the global powers will suspend their rivalries in order to concentrate on the existential risks to mankind. A 'world state', which some saw as inevitable around the turn of the millennium, is now an ever more remote possibility. Similarly, deeper international cooperation between the major global actors is, as we have seen, an unlikely scenario. Planetary solidarity to address climate change, overpopulation, poverty, and all the other common threats to the welfare of the world may be desirable,

but it is wildly improbable. Instead, as we have seen, the Great Powers will probably try to weaponise these challenges against their rivals. The arc of history today bends not towards cooperation but towards competition.[19]

Fifteen

The Regional Futures of the Great Powers

REGIONS MATTER INTENSELY to the Great Powers. Regions are the sources of foodstuffs and raw materials, which along with international trade pass through ‘chokepoints’. Regions constitute, or are claimed as, exclusive ‘spheres of influence’ by the Great Powers. Regions serve as buffers and staging areas. The big question today is which parts of the world will be most heavily contested in the future, and by whom? Will these clashes inevitably lead to war? Can conflict be localised, or is it fated to escalate into a global conflagration?

Despite, or rather because of, globalisation, the Great Powers are deeply embedded in regional dynamics today. Russia continues to attack Ukraine not only because it rejects Ukrainian nationhood but also because it feels threatened by the prospect of NATO and EU enlargement in its ‘near abroad’. Some of the main chokepoints, the local bottlenecks through which trade and military forces must pass—especially the Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca—are as important now as they were a hundred years ago. In addition to the traditional resource geography of oil reserves, gas fields, and granaries, we now have the quest for ‘critical metals’. It turns out that the ethereal-sounding ‘cloud’ cannot function without some very terrestrial data centres and the energy to cool them.

Of course, geography is not immutable, nor is it simply destiny. It is constantly evolving and geopolitically constructed, both conceptually and physically. As the example of the Rhine in Franco-German history shows, one man’s buffer may be the next man’s conduit: As France and Germany moved from conflict to cooperation, the role of the river changed as well. As for strategically important raw materials, ‘criticalities’ evolve depending

on technology, making it difficult to predict which minerals in which parts of the world will matter in the future.

Moreover, future human action may significantly transform the geopolitical landscape. Were Russia to deepen and widen the canal linking the Baltic and the White Seas, for instance, that would enable Chinese shipping to reach Germany along the Northern Sea Route without passing the North Cape or the Danish Sound. In addition, global warming is slowly changing the strategic environment by opening up the Arctic to commercial and military competition; by threatening to flood large parts of low-lying South-East Asia and Oceania, including China; and by reducing sea rainfall levels to an extent that is placing a question mark over the navigability of the Panama Canal.

Some of the world's regions will probably escape major Great Power tensions. To be sure, the second Trump administration has raised the prospect of American expansion into Greenland, Canada, and Panama, and it has adopted an unusually threatening attitude towards Mexico. It is premature, though, to speak—as some have done—of 'a new age of colonial conquest in the Americas'. A US annexation of neighbouring countries is highly unlikely, although full-scale military intervention against states in the region that might be regarded as disruptive, such as Venezuela, is plausible. Similarly, while it is true that the PRC is penetrating Latin America economically and exerting a stronger grip on its infrastructure, such as port facilities, Washington is likely to contest that attempt vigorously and in fact has already reasserted itself at the Panama Canal.[1]

There are a number of interstate tensions in South America, but even if they lead to armed conflicts, these will probably not spread. The most acute flashpoint at the moment is the Essequibo dispute between Venezuela and Guyana. Venezuela, which claims well over half the territory of its much smaller neighbour, recently passed a law demanding the surrender of the contested areas; it is unlikely, though, to launch an invasion. Farther south, Argentina maintains its demand for the return of 'Las Malvinas', the Falkland Islands, but while Britain is noticeably weaker in naval terms since the war in 1982, Argentina now has virtually no amphibious capacity to speak of.

The only Latin American state with the potential to become a Great Power is the continent's largest and most populous country, Brazil, which has had that ambition since the end of the nineteenth century. In the first ten years after the turn of the millennium, Brazil was indeed on the rise economically and politically, as reflected in its founding membership of the BRICS. More recently, the country has stagnated, and its share of global GDP is projected to decrease in the coming years. Of course, it is possible that Brazil might be turned around under more vigorous leadership. Even if Brazil substantially gains in importance, though, its culture and history suggest that it would not be a disruptive force and would be unlikely to provoke either a balancing coalition on the continent or outside intervention. The next global conflagration, in short, is very unlikely to start in Latin America.

It is not clear whether the great landmass to the south, Antarctica, can be kept out of Great Power conflict. So far, international collaboration under the Antarctica Treaty has survived the Cold War and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The Great Powers—the leading ones here are Russia, China, and the United States—have agreed to use the continent only for peaceful purposes, mainly conservation and scientific work. In part this is because it is operationally very difficult to either project power into the region or deny it to others. That said, the pressures to militarise the region—like the Arctic—will rise in the decades ahead. In particular, scientific equipment there could be repurposed to support military command, control, and communications. In that event, other powers might target those installations. Russia and the PRC have mentioned Antarctica in their national security strategies, which suggests that both see the area as a site of future contestation.[2]

In Africa, the Great Powers are already conducting various proxy conflicts, and these are set to intensify over the coming decades. Russia is in the ascendant in West Africa, and it may be that Moscow will attempt to compensate for any waning influence in the Middle East by expanding its presence in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali, Niger, and Sudan. Russia might also extend its reach into other parts of the continent, especially Ethiopia and Nigeria. The PRC's influence is less territorial and more broadly economic than Russia's and stretches across the entire

continent. It remains to be seen whether Moscow and Beijing will be able to maintain this informal division of labour, and to what extent the Western powers—especially the United States and France, but also the United Kingdom—succeed in containing Russian and Chinese ambitions.

These tensions will interact with existing political fault lines within Africa spanning the length and breadth of the continent. The long-running conflict around the African Great Lakes might erupt again, pitching the Democratic Republic of the Congo against much smaller but formidably organised Rwanda. Sudan could disintegrate further, sucking in outside involvement from Russia, especially, but also Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). In the Horn of Africa, full-scale war between Ethiopia and Eritrea is probable. The possible conflict with the biggest potential to draw in outside powers is in Libya, where France and Russia could clash, and where Egypt, Turkey, Italy, and the UAE might step up their interventions. Even there, though, the stakes are not large enough for any of the principal foreign actors to risk an escalation.

Whether a Great Power will emerge *in* Africa will depend on several factors. The continent already boasts three countries—Ethiopia, Congo, and Egypt—with populations greater than a hundred million, and one (Nigeria) with more than two hundred million. No African country, though, is projected to be among the ten largest economies of the world by 2050. South Africa, historically a leading force, is too wracked by corruption and internal problems to be a serious contender. In fact, no African state is likely to meet the criteria for Great Powerness in the foreseeable future. For this reason, no major challenge to global stability can be expected from the continent, and the rivalries of outside powers there will probably not escalate into a major conflict.

This cannot be said with the same level of confidence for the Middle East, which has long been wracked by state failure, interstate conflict, and Great Power interference. There is a chance that the region will find peace through some kind of broad-based ‘Westphalia for the Middle East’, or at least a series of bilateral settlements. The likelihood, though, is that the region will not come to rest. The stakes are higher in the Middle East than in Africa and Latin America, given the region’s importance for world oil supply and the presence of key US allies, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. The possible developments there include the resumption of US-Israeli

attacks on Iran, another October 7, 2023–style terror attack on Israel, the expulsion of the Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank, the return of civil war to Lebanon and Syria, and an international effort to end the Houthi stranglehold on shipping passing through the Bab el-Mandeb. The tensions in the Middle East are also likely to have an ever-greater impact on Western societies, widening fissures around Muslim immigration and generally fuelling the growth of sectarianism and populism.[3]

That said, the Middle East has been remarkable for experiencing a series of armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War—such as the Gulf War, the invasion of Iraq, the Syrian civil war, the Gaza war, and the American-Israeli bombing raids on Iran's nuclear programme—without these, so far, developing into a wider global conflagration. Moreover, the Middle East is unlikely to produce a plausible local candidate for Great Power status. Turkey and Israel possess some of the reach and resilience, but they lack the necessary reputation, and—above all—resources, to act as Great Powers.

The biggest areas of contention, therefore, will probably remain Europe and Asia. How the Great Power story unfolds there will depend in part on US strategy: whether current and future administrations in Washington prioritise one region over the other, and how they do so. In particular, it will depend on whether these administrations regard resource commitments, such as military deployments or economic and military aid, to the two continents holistically or in terms of a zero-sum game—in other words, whether one region's gain is automatically regarded as the other's loss. It will also depend on whether America seeks to deter its adversaries in both theatres through 'denial' or through 'punishment', and whether 'punitive' economic action is still practical in a deglobalising world.[4]

At the moment, despite President Trump's recent gyrations, it seems more likely than not that the United States will—ultimately—maintain its commitments to Ukraine and to the defence of Europe. In that event, and if the Europeans deliver on their promised increases in military spending, Russia should be contained comfortably. Putin will then either be completely ejected from Ukraine or forced into what would be, for him, an unsatisfactory compromise. In either case, Ukraine would probably join the EU, and perhaps even NATO. The threat of a Russian attack on the Baltic

states would recede. A change of regime in Moscow would probably follow, though whether this would result in a more or less aggressive Russia is not clear.

If, instead, the United States substantially reduces or even winds up its European commitments, this will have a big impact on European geopolitics. Putin might well gain the upper hand over Kiev, which would be an unmitigated disaster for Europe. Putin would overrun or at least neutralise Ukraine, currently one of the continent's most significant military powers, giving Russia all the resources of one of the world's great granaries and 'battery baskets' (that is, sources of critical metals to make electric batteries). Moscow would gain a new staging ground to launch attacks on its neighbours to the south and west, and it would feel emboldened to intimidate or even invade the Baltic states with the forces released by the end of the Ukraine war. The resulting pressures could tear the European Union apart.

In that event, the task of containing Russia would fall on Britain as the most significant Great Power in democratic Europe; indeed, Washington has already asked London to coordinate Western support for Ukraine. The British-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) would face off against Russia in the Baltic Sea region, High North, and North Atlantic. Collectively, the JEF —especially if reinforced by other members of NATO, such as Germany, France, and Poland—has the resources to contain Russia. Indeed, if it came down to it, a fully mobilised Britain—with a substantially larger economy than Russia's—should be able to deal with Moscow on its own, albeit with difficulty, in any confrontation involving only conventional weapons. Of course, the willingness of British society to sustain such a commitment—though far greater than that of most other European countries—is not a given.

Whatever Washington decides, the United Kingdom is likely to become more important in Europe. If the United States stays, it will look to Britain as its chief deputy on the continent. If it leaves, Britain will face a difficult moment of readjustment to the loss of its US-provided 'enabling systems', such as communications, transport, and targeting, but will then gain enhanced importance. Moreover, Britain is already an important actor not merely in the Baltic and High North, but with respect to the security of the sea-lanes between Europe and the rest of the world as well. It is also an

important force in the Mediterranean, and a US withdrawal there would increase the relative significance of Gibraltar and the sovereign base areas in Cyprus.

An American withdrawal would also greatly increase the importance of Poland and Germany, the two largest Central European states. Poland, which may well continue its trajectory to becoming the continent's strongest democratic land power (next to Ukraine), would almost certainly stand firm against Russia on its own border, and would probably crush the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. Germany, which is now the biggest military spender in Europe, would probably—eventually—shoulder its share of the responsibility. The big imponderable, of course, is Russia's nuclear arsenal, which sets it apart from all European actors, with the exception of Britain and France, whose arsenals are much smaller. If London or Paris failed to head off Moscow's threats through its own deterrent, the future would look more uncertain. The result would probably be attempts by Germany, Poland, and other states to acquire atomic bombs, with all the implications for the non-proliferation regime.

The greatest danger, in the event of an American withdrawal, would be on NATO and the EU's south-eastern flank, where British, Polish, and German reach would be at its weakest. If Ukraine lost its ability to threaten the Russian Navy in the Black Sea, and if Romania and its NATO allies failed to contain future Russian subversion of Moldova or a Russian attempt to establish a land bridge to its exclave in Transnistria, the whole of south-eastern Central Europe and the Balkans would be thrown open to Moscow's armies. The region is literally combustible. Transnistria is home to Eastern Europe's largest depot of conventional ammunition at Cobasna, which, if it ignited, would have an effect comparable to that of the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. That said, a renewal of Russian ambitions in the Black Sea region would inevitably provoke Turkey into taking countermeasures against Moscow, so that a balance of power in that region would soon be reached.

In this scenario, much would depend on France. The retreat of the United States would vindicate Emmanuel Macron's case for 'European sovereignty'. Unlike Britain, which relies on America for the development, manufacturing, and maintenance of its nuclear deterrent and many other military platforms, France is practically and psychologically well equipped

to survive a post-American Europe. If Washington reduced its salience, that of Paris would surely rise, particularly in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. One way or the other, the result of an American retreat or even withdrawal would probably not be a Russian walkover in Europe but a new Great Power equilibrium on the continent.

If America and Russia are the most important variables in Europe, they are not the only ones. The future of the European Union is another great imponderable. Will it fragment under the Russian onslaught, either militarily or politically? Will it react to adversity by retreating to its ‘core’? Or will it find increased unity, either as an inter-governmental alliance or by completing a full political union and becoming a Great Power in its own right? Might it use that latter momentum to enlarge farther to the east, with all the resulting geopolitical implications? At the moment, it seems unlikely that the current leadership of the European Union and its member states will ever find the inner coherence it needs to become a Great Power, but it is possible that a younger generation will.

The future of the continent will also be shaped by the relations between Britain and the European Union, especially the latter’s two most important member states, France and Germany. Here the key question is whether the United Kingdom, which contributes disproportionately to the security of Europe through NATO, can be reintegrated into the political and economic management of the continent despite Brexit. At the very least, the EU and the United Kingdom will have to maintain or amicably renegotiate the modus vivendi they have found over Northern Ireland and Gibraltar. Alternatively, the United Kingdom may persist with the Starmer government’s return to the EU’s regulatory orbit. There is also the question of whether the EU will be dominated by either France or Germany, or whether the old Franco-German directorate can be re-established.

The other area of future Great Power activity in Europe may be the Balkans. Long a backwater, it is possible that the region will become a cockpit again, either because of the emergence of internal disruptors or because of outside intervention or for both reasons. At some point, the Serbian entity Republika Srpska will probably attempt to secede from Bosnia-Herzegovina, thus overthrowing the Dayton Agreement. A lot will depend on whether Serbia supports this endeavour and is in turn backed by Russia, and on whether the EU and NATO intervene to protect Dayton. On

current performance, Belgrade has shown little appetite for going to war again on behalf of the Bosnian Serbs, and Moscow has given the Balkans a low priority, but this could change. Alternatively, the enlargement of the EU into the Western Balkans, so long stalled, could give the region the stability that has eluded it for so long.

For the first time in its history, the fate of Europe will be determined not merely by European and American actors but also by Asian states. We should expect that the People's Republic of China and North Korea will step up their efforts to support a Russian victory in Ukraine, or at least to prevent Putin from losing there. The PRC will also most likely persist in its attempts to split the European Union from the United States, pointing to its own achievements in the green transformation and exploiting European unease over American unreliability in an era of tariffs and trade and investment realignment.

These forces will shape and be shaped by European domestic politics. It remains to be seen whether the populist and pro-Russian trend represented by Viktor Orban in Hungary and Robert Fico in Slovakia will persist or even spread to larger countries. Alternatively, the approaches favoured by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and the Polish PiS (Law and Justice) party—both of them populist on most issues but hostile to Russian aggression—may prevail. Still, if immigration is left to run unchecked, it is quite possible that within a decade both France and Germany will have extreme right-wing governments reluctant to confront Russia or China. In addition, any EU delay in acknowledging Britain's ordering role on the continent will also have domestic consequences in the United Kingdom. Failure to find a suitable trade-off between Britain's military commitment to Europe and its desire for a closer economic connection may well lead to a surge in British 'Trumpism', and in turn lead the United Kingdom to turn its back on the continent.

If the Balkans were the pre-1914 'powder keg of Europe' which sparked the First World War, the tinderbox of our time is surely Asia. It contains six of the world's nuclear powers—India, Pakistan, the PRC, North Korea, Russia, and the United States (as there are numerous US military bases in the region)—and at least six of the globe's most dangerous areas. Moving

from west to east, there is the antagonism between Pakistan and India, which briefly erupted into open warfare in May 2025; the Sino-Indian dispute over the boundary in the Himalayas, which has repeatedly led to bloodshed in recent years; the standoff on the Korean Peninsula, where North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un has periodically launched artillery attacks on America's ally South Korea and threatened to obliterate it with nuclear weapons; the confrontations in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea; and the Northern Islands dispute between Russia and Japan.

As in Europe, much will depend on whether the United States perseveres with the priority it has assigned to Asia, and whether it seeks the straightforward containment of China or some kind of 'grand bargain' with the PRC. If it is the former, the region can expect increased American commitment but cannot be sure how this will be received by North Korea and the PRC. If it is the latter, the volatility will come from the United States itself, as nobody will know quite what to expect and how much Washington will sacrifice in pursuit of a 'deal'. This makes the future of the region even more uncertain than that of Europe.

In South Asia, the coming decades will be dominated by three major questions. The first is whether India and Pakistan will become embroiled in a major war. This seems more likely than not, and given the effectiveness of Chinese weaponry during the most recent conflict, in May 2025, it cannot be assumed that India, despite its much greater economic weight, will prevail. The second question is whether the PRC will attack India again. This seems highly likely—senior Indian leaders are waiting for the 'other shoe to drop'—but not until the war in Ukraine has been resolved. Before then, Beijing will not want to challenge an important Russian ally or to risk pushing New Delhi any closer to Washington. This relates to the third question, which is whether the Indians will join the Western camp. It would take a lot for them to abandon Moscow, but they might do so if this was the only way of escaping humiliation at the hands of the PRC.

Recently, Indochina has once again become an international flashpoint. It is possible that the PRC will be drawn into the unrest in Myanmar which regularly spills over into its territory. That would probably provoke a response from India and the United States. There is also a smaller risk that the confrontation between Thailand and Cambodia, which led to open warfare in the summer of 2025, might spread. This is essentially a territorial

dispute about three provinces in eastern Thailand which are claimed by Cambodia. If it escalates, the conflict would put a question mark over Thai plans to build a ‘land bridge’ across the Kra Peninsula linking the Bay of Bengal with the Gulf of Thailand and thus the rest of Asia, bypassing the Strait of Malacca.[5]

The PRC’s demand for the reunification of Taiwan with the mainland is the most public point of contention between Beijing and Washington. It is possible that China—where Xi has ordered that the People’s Liberation Army be ‘ready’ to seize the island by 2027—will give the order to invade in the next few years, or to impose a blockade. The former head of the US Navy’s Indo-Pacific Command, Admiral Philip Davidson, even warned that the PRC might attack Taiwan in a six-year period starting in 2021—that is, by 2027. If so, the United States will have to work out how to respond, and full-scale war may result. That said, the regular crises over the island tend to follow a predictable pattern, and China is unlikely to risk a full-scale invasion unless it is sure that the United States will not intervene or it sees itself pushed into a corner—for example, through a Taiwanese declaration of independence, which it is mandated by law to oppose, using force if necessary. Besides, the resistance mounted by Ukraine against a much stronger adversary has forced Chinese leaders and war planners to rethink their options.

War is also possible on the Korean Peninsula, where North Korea’s dictator Kim Jong Un has intensified his hostile rhetoric against South Korea. He now commands not only a formidable conventional army but also a missile force capable of delivering atomic weapons as far afield as Japan and even the United States. It is quite possible that he will seek to exploit the ambivalence of large sections of South Korean public opinion about Sino-American rivalry and test Washington’s resolve to defend its ally in Seoul, a city right on the border and painfully exposed to North Korean artillery and rocket fire.

To the north-east, another potential conflict stems from the rivalry between Russia and Japan, which led to repeated bloodshed in the first half of the twentieth century and simmered during the Cold War. Tokyo objects to Moscow’s occupation of the southern Kuril Islands—‘the Northern Islands’—but has more or less given up hope that they will be returned by

Putin. Armed conflict there is unlikely in the short term, but that could change rapidly. Just as Russia turned to the Far East in the late nineteenth century after its defeat in the Crimean War, Moscow might react to victory or defeat in Ukraine by shifting attention to the Far East.

There is also likely to be tension in the South Pacific, where the People's Republic of China has recently made serious inroads, especially in the Solomon Islands. Apart from the United States, the major actors in the region are Australia, France (with its extensive overseas possessions there), and—albeit to a lesser extent—Britain (through the AUKUS submarine alliance). Further PRC advances would threaten Australia's lines of communication with America and would be vigorously resisted by Australia, the United States, and probably also New Zealand. If China continues to expand its naval, carrier, and amphibious capacity, and to extend its footprint in the area, a full-scale confrontation with the West in the South Pacific would become more likely.

Though the battle lines are clearly drawn in much of the Indo-Pacific, this is not true of its principal 'swing region', South-East Asia. This area is experiencing rapid economic growth and—thanks to Indonesia—a demographic surge as well. Today, the region contains about seven hundred million people, some 8 percent of the world's population, and more than 7 percent of global GDP, a figure which is expected to rise in the decades to come. In addition, South-East Asia contains a wealth of natural resources under the South China Sea as well as the vital chokepoint of the Strait of Malacca, through which nearly 30 percent of global trade passes, including oil for Japan and China.

Whoever wins the struggle for South-East Asia will probably prevail in the wider struggle for mastery in the Indo-Pacific. The states of the region have long insisted that they do not want to have to 'choose' between China and the United States. At the moment, many of them—including Singapore and Indonesia—seem to be leaning, reluctantly, towards the PRC, on account of the perceived unreliability of the Trump administration. A minority, especially the Philippines, strongly support the United States. It is possible, therefore, that coming decades will see a 'peaceful conquest' of the region by China, but equally probable that Washington and Beijing will come to blows there.

This point bears on the future of the most perilous space in an already dangerous continent. This is not the India-Pakistan border, the Korean Peninsula, or even the Taiwan Strait. The conflicts in such places are long-standing and to a considerable extent ritualised and binary. In the South China Sea, by contrast, the situation is complex and becoming ever more so, with multiple actors taking more and more risks—such as the PRC, with its massive programme of constructing artificial islands. There is no script, for example, for a clash between China and the Philippines over Scarborough Shoal, which could lead to the United States being unexpectedly called upon to honour its treaty commitments, and, perhaps equally unexpectedly to some, actually doing so. The resulting escalation ladder could ignite the 'tinderbox' referred to above.[6]

The European and Indo-Pacific theatres will be closely connected for several reasons. First, because, as we have seen, developments in both parts of the world may depend on priorities set in Washington and Moscow, and —to a lesser extent—in London and Paris as well. Second, because actors in both areas will be watching events in the other carefully. Many opponents of the PRC view a victory for Putin as a victory for Xi. China, in turn, has been candid that it cannot allow Russia to be defeated, as the West would then concentrate all its efforts in Asia. The deployment of North Korean troops in support of Russia in Kursk in 2024 was only the most striking example of the interconnection between the European and Indo-Pacific theatres.

This means that the outbreak of full-scale war in either Europe or Asia could well escalate into a global conflagration. If the initial contours of such a conflict are already discernible, its permutations and outcome are unknown. In the event of a full-scale Russian attack on a NATO country, Moscow would have to assume that the alliance would resist and target potential hostile forces across the continent accordingly. More or less the whole of Europe—with the possible exceptions of Malta, Switzerland, Austria, and the Republic of Ireland—would be instantly at war. If things went badly for Russia, then China and North Korea might well attempt to draw off some Western resources by starting a diversion in Asia, or they

might seize the opportunity to attack Taiwan and South Korea while Washington was preoccupied elsewhere.

Likewise, the Western powers would most likely be dragged into any full-scale conflict in the Indo-Pacific. In that event, the PRC would have to assume that all American bases in Korea, Japan, and across the region were a threat that had to be neutralised. China would also have to attack British and French assets, especially carriers and submarines if in striking distance. The United States and Europe, in turn, could not let Taiwan—which produces most of the vital microchips needed to power the world economy and many weapons systems—fall into the hands of the PRC. Conflict could not be localised. The two wars, in Europe and Asia, would merge. This, of course, is a very similar dynamic to that of autumn 1941, when Japan felt obliged to attack the United States and the British Empire simultaneously on the assumption that they would support each other, and Hitler sought to preempt American intervention against Germany in Europe.

Such a conflict might erupt suddenly in Europe and East Asia, but it would then probably spread in fits and starts across the world. India would want to stay out of any European war but might feel impelled to weigh in against China. Iran and Israel could seize the opportunity to complete unfinished business. Africa would probably see intensified proxy conflict and perhaps direct interventions. The broad outlines of the two coalitions seem clear enough, but we could also see some strange bedfellows. America, the European Union, the United Kingdom, Japan, South Korea, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand would be on one side. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—the ‘CRINKs’—would be on the other. It is anyone’s guess, though, which side—if any—India would choose. Though it is a Russian ally, it is a rival of China. Pakistan, likewise, is allied to both China and the United States. Some of the ultimate alignments would surprise us.

We cannot assume that the course of such a global war would necessarily follow that of earlier contests. The two sides are, on the face of it, much more evenly matched than they were in the first half of the twentieth century. Indeed, while the United States had a much larger manufacturing capacity than Germany and Japan did combined, today the position between the United States and the PRC is reversed in key sectors, such as shipbuilding. Moreover, the potentially neutral parts of the world—

such as India—are not only much more significant economically than in the past, when they were part of the British Empire, but also no longer automatically on the Western side. It is not surprising that in the many scenarios developed over the past two decades, the prospects for a Western victory have grown ever darker.[7]

That said, the ultimate outcome of a conventional conflict is not really in doubt. In military, if not commercial, terms, the West will continue to control the global commons for the foreseeable future. The CRINK coalition is geographically reasonably cohesive—China, Russia, and North Korea are all contiguous, and Iran is close to Russia—but all four powers are easily cut off from the rest of the world. Pretty much all of the global chokepoints—the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Gibraltar, the English Channel, the Danish Sound, the North Atlantic Gap, the Panama Canal, the Suez Canal, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz—are or probably would be under Western control. The Sino-Russian core would be hemmed in, just as Napoleon, the Kaiser, Hitler, and Imperial Japan were. Russia and China, which are trying to make themselves 'blockade proof', know this. For the West, a war would be catastrophic, but for Russia and China it would probably be terminal.

Regardless of whoever wins a 'limited' conventional conflict, though, the outcome for the world would be terrible, and much worse still if either or both sides resorted to the use of nuclear weapons. Such a war cannot be meaningfully 'won' and should never be fought. Millions would die horribly; billions would be plunged into poverty as the world economy collapsed. It is therefore worth reflecting on how such a war might be avoided. This requires us to remind ourselves of how such conflicts broke out in the past, and to think about ways in which future catastrophes might be avoided.

The root causes of the most recent global conflagration, the Second World War, may have lain in competing territorial ambitions and ideological beliefs, but the conflict had two immediate triggers. First, the key protagonists believed they were running out of time. Hitler was convinced that he needed to settle the future of the German Reich in his lifetime, and he believed that an Anglo-American and Jewish-led international capitalist

coalition was joining forces against him. The Japanese leadership feared being slowly strangled by the United States. Both Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan fatefully decided to strike before it was ‘too late’. If the good news today is that none of the major challengers are seeking world domination, the bad news is that neither were Hitler or the Japanese. Like Russia and China, they were ‘only’ seeking to dominate their wider neighbourhoods, but that was enough to unleash unprecedented destruction.[8]

One of the reasons why the Cold War never ran ‘hot’ was because the Soviet Union was a Marxist power which believed in the inevitable victory of communism. Time was supposedly on its side. This is not true of Russia or China today. Putin’s attack on Ukraine was in part driven by a sense that time was working against him. Likewise, the PRC—long an ‘attentist’ power smugly awaiting its ‘peaceful rise’ to become the world’s greatest economy—has recently begun to stagnate. If China’s leaders believe that ‘Peak China’ is imminent or has even passed, this might incline them towards caution, but it might also impel them to act sooner rather than later. Wars are started by declining powers as much as by rising ones.[9]

Second, Great Powers lash out when they feel they have been boxed into a corner. Imperial Japan, for example, felt that US policy in the autumn of 1941 left it no choice. The American oil embargo meant that the Japanese navy and air force would eventually run out of fuel. The US ultimatum demanding a Japanese withdrawal from China threatened to tear the heart out of their Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. In the same way, the PRC could find itself backed into a corner if it were confronted with a Taiwanese declaration of independence, a full-scale economic decoupling, an energy blockade, or some other comparable challenge.

One clear sign of trouble ahead is when leaders state not only that conflict is inevitable, but that war has ‘already begun’. It was Hitler’s conviction that he was ‘already’ in an undeclared war with Franklin Roosevelt, which led him to take the foolhardy step of an open declaration of war on the United States (which in fact he presented as the recognition of an existing state of things rather than the creation of a new one). Putin has repeatedly hinted that he is already ‘in’ a war with the West or close to it, and the most senior Russian international relations analyst, Dmitri Trenin,

stated in July 2025 that his country was ‘already in a world war’ in which the West was out to ‘destroy’ Russia.[10]

All this leaves us with many questions. Has the Kremlin already decided to attack NATO in what it believes to be self-defence? The West can try to avoid pushing Putin into a corner, but what does one do with a man who so resolutely paints himself into a corner? Is the PRC looking to complete ‘national unification’ with Taiwan by the one hundredth anniversary of the takeover of China by the Chinese Communist Party in 2049, or is it thinking of a much shorter timeline, as Xi’s demand that the People’s Liberation Army be ‘ready’ to seize the island by the end of the 2020s suggests? Will Admiral Philip Davidson’s prediction of a six-year period of PRC preparation for an invasion of Taiwan, beginning in 2021, close peacefully in 2027, or will he prove to be correct? Will the Trump tariffs accelerate the Chinese timetable for war, as the US oil embargo did with Japan? Can the challengers of today be deterred in ways that those of the 1930s and 1940s were not? Will the status quo powers of today accommodate the ‘have-nots’ in ways they declined—for good reason—to accept in the past? Can they, in Hal Brands’s evocative phrase, ‘block the way forward’ to challengers without closing off their ‘way out’?[11]

The critical moment in any Great Power system is when the previously dominant state is overtaken by its challenger. The political scientist Graham Allison has shown that this has almost always involved war—for example, when seventeenth-century France overtook Spain, when eighteenth-century Britain overtook France, or when nineteenth- and twentieth-century Germany and Japan attempted to overtake the Western powers. The only peaceful power transitions of modern times were those from the British Empire to the United States, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which paved the way for the post–Cold War US unipolarity. But these were not really transitions in the classic sense: The shift from London to Washington was a rebalancing of shareholdings within the same enterprise rather than the defeat of one capital and a victory of the other. The end of the Cold War marked the temporary eclipse of a challenger rather than a move from Soviet to American hegemony. Be all this as it may, a peaceful transition from US to Chinese global hegemony is almost unimaginable, at

least so long as the CCP is in power in Beijing, because Washington and its allies would never permit the resulting limitations on Western freedoms.[12]

This places a particular obligation on Western elites to explore whether an accommodation between them and the two Eurasian autocracies can be reached. Many attempts to do so have been made over the past twenty years. They have all failed because the minimum demands of both sides proved incompatible. For example, Russia would never accept that Ukraine could become an independent state, and the West, or at least most of it, now cannot tolerate it becoming anything else. The People's Republic of China's quest for regional dominance—or regional security, as the PRC sees it—and for reunification with Taiwan flatly contradicts the basic interests of the United States and its allies in Asia. It is hard to see how this divide can be bridged.

In the end, therefore, the best guarantee of world peace will be restraint in Moscow and Beijing. Russia and China have studied German and Japanese failure closely; they have seen this film before, and they know how it ended. They are thus painfully aware that a military challenge to the Western order today cannot succeed and that it would lead—one way or the other—to their complete obliteration. Unlike their predecessors in Berlin and Tokyo, though, the leaders in Moscow and Beijing also have the capacity to bring the entire world down with them. If they insist on seeing this film again, none of us will like the ending.

Epilogue

THE OWL OF Minerva famously flies only at dusk. It may therefore be too early to determine what history will judge to have been the fate of the Great Powers in the third decade of the twenty-first century. So far, though, it appears that the state system has changed less than the conventional wisdom suggests. Undeniable geopolitical change, such as the growth of Chinese power, has been matched by an equally irrefutable failure of some other expected shifts to materialise.

For example, despite all the fanfare, technology is not a new superpower. The Great Powers are prevailing over the great corporations. Britain and America have shut Huawei out of their systems; the PRC internet giants are under attack at home by a suspicious regime; and the European Union is becoming ever more assertive with Western providers such as Google and Meta, the parent company of Facebook. Even in this sphere, therefore, our world remains dominated by states or alliances of states. The strongest of these are the Great Powers, and while the balance between them has shifted considerably, the continuities are more striking than the changes.

The United States still possesses the world's most powerful military and its largest and most dynamic economy. Moreover, despite the Trump administration, it still commands the support of most of the international liberal order, and despite the huge cost and abysmal failure of the 'War on Terror', and the humiliating withdrawal from Afghanistan, US strength is still unrivalled. Britain is re-establishing itself as a separate ordering system, and although it is far weaker than either the United States or the PRC, it remains one of the top five world powers, ahead of Russia.

By contrast, the 'contender' and 'challenger' powers remain largely unrealised projects. Germany is not merely constrained by but actively hides within the framework of NATO and the EU. It spends much more on

defence than it did in the past, but not nearly enough, and—at the moment—less than it has promised to. Brazil has barely registered as a world power, and even India has not made much headway in the past ten years, at least in relative terms; in fact, New Delhi is actually falling back relative to Beijing. Russia is still important, thanks to its massive nuclear arsenal and willingness to deploy conventional force beyond its borders, but it is becoming demographically and economically (once the distortions caused by military mobilization are factored out) weaker every year.

Perhaps the most striking continuity, though, concerns the PRC. China might well rise and rise without ever catching up. To be sure, the country has grown enormously in economic and technological terms, but it risks the classic 'middle-income trap': It may grow old before it gets rich. While China has been a major player since the 1950s, and will likely remain one, it will probably not dominate globally as much as many have come to expect. So the Great Powers of today—the United States, the People's Republic of China, the United Kingdom, Russia, and possibly France—are not so very different from those of recent times, and they behave much in the same way as Great Powers have in the past.

It is often said that only a truly global effort, either by a world government or a coalition of governments, will be able to address existential challenges such as climate change or nuclear conflict, rendering the Great Powers redundant. That may be so, but international rivalries will probably prevent any really decisive cooperation from coming about in the future, just as they have in the past. The end of Great Power politics will not be possible without the end of history, and if there is one thing we know about history, it is that it will never end. The Great Powers, like the poor, will always be with us.

Discover Your Next Great Read

Get sneak peeks, book recommendations, and news about your favorite authors.

Tap here to learn more.

BASIC
BOOKS

Acknowledgements

I incurred many debts in writing this book. The greatest is to my wife, Anita Bunyan, and my children Constance, Hugh, and Katherine, who read and commented on the entire text. I am also very grateful to the following: Sam Abraham, Anahita Arian, Adithi Avadhani, Cathy Bains, John Bew, Hal Brands, Hugo Bromley, Doug Chalmers, Eunice Chong, Charles Clarke, David Cowan, Richard Dearlove, Gemma Deng, Jack Ellis, William Ellison, Jenny Fan, Ethan Findlow, Eyck Freymann, Ivi Fung, Frank Gavin, Lucas Haskins, Mattias Hessérus, Mike Hochberg, Yuichi Hosoya, Elke van Hoye, William Hurst, Will James, Sihan Jiang, Paul Kennedy, Justine Kent, Darya Khandoga, Minsoo Kim, Molly Kiniry, Donatas Kupciunas, Glacier Kwong, Tim Less, Calla Li, Sydney Lynch, Mina Markovic, Harrison McSweeney, Jay Mens, Patrick Milton, Wess Mitchell, Conor Mockler, Janani Mohan, Ray Morgan, Sönke Neitzel, Bei Le Ng, Alex Peake, Olivia Peterson, Mari Puttick, Suzanne Raine, James Rogers, Ksenia Rundin, Nadia Schadlow, Lukas Schmelter, Leonard Schuette, Jason Sharman, Ved Shinde, Daniel Simms, Barnabas Szabo, Elvira Tamus, Dulce Marcelle Tributino, João Vale de Almeida, Lisa Vickers, Steven Ward, Charis Whitcombe, Trevelyan Wing, Georgina Wright, Mizuki Yamamoto, Ayse Zarakol, and Mariah Zhong.

Notes

Introduction: The New Great Power World

1. National Security Strategy of the United States of America, White House, December 2017, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf, 25, 27. See also the summary in US Naval Institute Staff, '2018 Department of Defense National Defense Strategy', USNI News, updated January 22, 2018, https://news.usni.org/2018/01/19/2018-department-defense-national-defense-strategy. Strictly speaking, 'geopolitics' refers to the intersection of geography and international affairs. This book uses the term in its wider, perhaps inflationary sense, to describe interstate rivalry more generally. For a critique, see Kenneth Weisbrode, 'Geopolitics After the Cold War', in *Geopolitics and War*, ed. Jeremy Black (Rome: Societa Italiana di Storia Militare, 2025), 485–502, esp. 485.

2. On the threat of atomic war, see Graham Allison, 'Nuclear Weapons Still Matter', *Foreign Policy*, January 5, 2023, 1–2; Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala, 'The Return of Nuclear Great Power Politics (or Why We Stopped Worrying About Terrorists and the Bomb)', *European Journal of International Security* 10, no. 1 (2025): 133–149.

3. Tony Blair, 'Full Text: Tony Blair's Speech', *The Guardian*, September 27, 2005, www.theguardian.com/uk/2005/sep/27/labourconference.speeches.

4. Ralph Bollmann, *Angela Merkel: Die Kanzlerin und ihre Zeit* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2023), 472–473.

5. Thomas Friedman, *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (London: Allen Lane, 2005). For a critique emphasising the importance of distance, see Patrick Porter, *The Global Village Myth: Distance, War and the Limits of Power* (London: Hurst, 2015).

6. Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, 'Weaponized Interdependence: How Economic Networks Shape State Coercion',

International Security 44, no. 1 (2019): 42–79; Laurence D. Fink, ‘Chairman’s Letter to Shareholders’, BlackRock, Inc., March 24, 2022.

7. See the conclusion to Hugo Bromley and Eyck Freymann, *On Day One: An Economic Contingency Plan for a Taiwan Crisis*, CGSP Occasional Paper Series no. 4 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 2024).

8. Thucydides is quoted in ‘Thucydides’, *Oxford Essential Quotations*, 6th ed., ed. Susan Ratcliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), originally *History of the Peloponnesian War* bk. 5, ch. 89.

9. George Modelski and William Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers: The Coevolution of Global Politics and Economics* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996); Daniel Drezner, ‘State Structure, Technological Leadership and the Maintenance of Hegemony’, *Review of International Studies* 27 (2001): 3–25. For a maximalist view of the importance of technological change, see Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr., *The Origins of Victory: How Disruptive Military Innovation Determines the Fates of Great Powers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), and for the intersection between the environment and geopolitics, see Shannon O’Lear, *Environmental Geopolitics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018), which says little about the Great Powers, and Robert Falkner and Barry Buzan, eds., *Great Powers, Climate Change, and Global Environmental Responsibilities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022). For the importance of population, see Giuseppe Terranova, ‘Demography, Geopolitics and Great Power: A Lesson from the Past’, *AIMS Geosciences* 9, no. 4 (2023): 798–809.

10. Georgi Gospodinov, *Time Shelter* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2023), 47. A concrete example which looks at the importance of history in understanding Eurasian geopolitics today is Jeffrey Mankoff, *Empires of Eurasia: How Imperial Legacies Shape International Security* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022). For the connection between the study of history and policymaking, see Robert Crowcroft, ed., *Applied History and Contemporary Policymaking: School of Statecraft* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023); John Bew, Andrew Ehrhardt, and Mattias Hessérus, *Classics of Applied History* (Stockholm: Stolpe, 2023); and Francis J. Gavin, *Thinking Historically: A Guide to Statecraft and Strategy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2025). For the importance of historical narratives, see Manjari Chatterjee Miller, *Why Nations Rise:*

Narratives and the Path to Great Power (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). See also Kathrin Bachleitner, *Collective Memory in International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

11. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001); Robert D. Kaplan, *The Tragic Mind: Fear, Fate and the Burden of Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023).

Chapter One: What Is a Great Power?

1. Luca Zenobi, 'Venice's *Terrafirma* Expansion and the Negotiation of Territories in Late Medieval Italy', *Ateneo Veneto: Rivista di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti* 18, no. 2 (2019): 188; 'Protocol of Conference Between Austria, Prussia and Russia, Signed at Vienna 22 September 1814', Oxford Public International Law, accessed January 12, 2026, https://opil.ouplaw.com/display/10.1093/law:oht/law-oht-63-CTS-359.regGroup.1/law-oht-63-CTS-359 (emphasis added).

2. Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. and with an introduction by Georg G. Iggers, trans. Wilma A. Iggers (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011).

3. Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003); Halford J. Mackinder, *The Geographical Pivot of History* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2019).

4. Sönke Neitzel, *Weltmacht oder Untergang: Die Weltreichslehre im Zeitalter des Imperialismus* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000); Brendan Simms, *Die Rueckkehr des Grossraums?* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2023).

5. E. H. Carr, *International Relations Since the Peace Treaties* (London: Macmillan, 1937), 258.

6. Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988).

7. Edward N. Luttwak, 'From Geopolitics to Geo-Economics: Logic of Conflict, Grammar of Commerce', *National Interest*, no. 20 (Summer 1990): 17–23; Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Succeed in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2004); G. John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

8. Graham Allison, *Destined for War? Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). On power transitions, see also Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, *Rising Titans, Falling Giants: How Great Powers Exploit Power Shifts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018).

9. The PRC foreign minister Yang Yiechi is quoted in Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New

York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 175.

10. See Stefano Guzzini, ‘On the Measure of Power and the Power of Measure in International Relations’, DIIS Working Paper 2009:28, Danish Institute for International Studies, 2009, 5; William Mulligan, ‘Great Powers’, in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*, ed. Peter Stearns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

11. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), 72; Churchill, quoted in Nicholas Burns, ‘Great Power and Global Responsibility in 1918 and 2018’, *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 43 (2019): 22. See also Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 200–202.

12. For the idea that some states are more sovereign than others, see Roland Paris, ‘The Right to Dominate: How Old Ideas About Sovereignty Pose New Challenges for World Order’, *International Organisation* 74 (2020): 453–489.

13. John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: Norton, 2001), 2; Richard Ned Lebow, *Why Nations Fight: Past and Future Motives for War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

14. Michael Beckley, ‘The Power of Nations. Measuring What Matters’, *International Security* 43, no. 2 (2018): 9.

15. Ashley J. Tellis, Janice Bially, Christopher Layne, and Melissa McPherson, *Measuring National Power in the Post-Industrial Age* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2000).

16. Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 65 et passim, argues that economic strength alone is not enough. For a view which stresses economic power and is generally sceptical of the idea of ‘great powers’, see the interesting critique by Phillips Payson O’Brien, *War and Power: A Full-Spectrum Study of Modern Warfare* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2025).

17. Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Basing and the Great Powers, 1200–2000* (London: Routledge, 2007). For the importance of regional preponderance to Great Powerness, see also Andrew Hurrell, ‘Hegemony, Liberalism and Global Order: What Space for Would-Be Great Powers?’, *International Affairs* 82, no. 1 (2006): 8. The role of statecraft is discussed in A. Wess Mitchell, *Great Power Diplomacy: The Skill of Statecraft from*

Attila the Hun to Kissinger (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025).

18. Barry R. Posen, 'Command of the Commons. The Military Foundation of US Hegemony', *International Security* 28, no. 1 (2003): 5–46.

19. Steven Ward, *Status and the Challenge of Rising Powers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). On Brazil see David R. Mares and Harold A. Trinkunas, *Aspirational Power: Brazil on the Long Road to Global Influence* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2016). On the importance of 'whether a great power's claim is recognized by others', see Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 63.

20. Quoted in Michael D. Swaine, 'Xi Jinping's Address to the Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs: Assessing and Advancing Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics', *China Leadership Monitor*, no. 46 (2015): 5.

21. Robert Ralston, 'Make Us Great Again: The Causes and Consequences of Declinism in Great Powers' (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 2020).

22. See Robert Winder, *Soft Power: The New Great Game* (London: Abacus, 2021). See also Hendrik W. Ohnesorge, *Soft Power: The Forces of Attraction in International Relations* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2020); Jonathan McClory, *Socially Distanced Diplomacy: The Future of Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in a Fragile World* (London: Sanctuary Counsel; Los Angeles: USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 2021).

23. See Joslyn Barnhart, *The Consequences of Humiliation: Anger and Status in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

24. T. C. W. Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe, 1648–1815* (London: Penguin, 2008), 667.

25. See Michael Mazarr, 'What Makes a Power Great: The Real Drivers of Rise and Fall', *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2022, 52.

26. Lawrence Freedman, 'The Rise and Fall of Great Power Wars', *International Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2019): 101–118.

Chapter Two: The Emergence of the Great Powers

1. John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire Since 1405* (London: Allen Lane, 2007); Peter Turchin, ‘A Theory for Formation of Large Empires’, *Journal of Global History* 4, no. 2 (2009): 191–217.

2. For the ‘great houses’, see Ayse Zarakol, *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of the Eastern World Orders* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 116. For the grand sweep see also Jakub J. Grygiel, *Great Powers and Geopolitical Change* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

3. Dariusz Kolodziejczyk and Peter Fibiger Bang, eds., *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). See also Richard Overy, *Why War?* (London: Pelican, 2024), 175; Nancy Shields Kollmann, *The Russian Empire, 1450–1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 129–130; Dominic Lieven, *In the Shadow of the Gods: The Emperor in World History* (London: Allen Lane, 2022).

4. Andrew Phillips, *How the East Was Won: Barbarian Conquerors, Universal Conquest and the Making of Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

5. Quoted in Izidor Janzekovic, ‘The Balance of Power from the Thirty Years War and the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the War of the Spanish Succession and the Peace of Utrecht (1713)’, *History of European Ideas* 49, no. 3 (2023): 572.

6. John K. Fairbank, ed., *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China’s Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968).

7. David C. Kang, *East Asia Before the West: Five Centuries of Trade and Tribute* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

8. ‘Walter Raleigh’, in *Oxford Essential Quotations*, 4th ed., ed. Susan Ratcliffe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), originally ‘A Discourse of the Invention of Ships, Anchors, Compass, &c.’. Evelyn is quoted in Bridget Orr, *Empire on the English Stage, 1660–1714* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 7.

9. Brendan Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire, 1714–1783* (London: Allen Lane, 2007) (the Pitt

quote is on 184); Juergen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens: Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1998).

10. Michael Axworthy, *The Sword of Persia: Nadir Shah from Tribal Warrior to Conquering Tyrant* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

11. Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005). The quotations are taken from Darwin, *After Tamerlane*, 131, 201.

12. Beatrice de Graaf, Ido de Haan, and Brian Vick, *Securing Europe After Napoleon: 1815 and the New European Security Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). Castlereagh is quoted in Mark Mazower, *Governing the World. The History of an Idea* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), 9. The 'declaration' is quoted in Pieter J.C. Sterenborg, 'Neutrality in Belgium, and the Netherlands, 1899–1914' (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2023), 35.

13. My thinking here has been influenced by Alfonso Goizueta Alfaro, 'Britain and the Cuban Question: The Struggle Against Disorder in the Spanish Atlantic World, 1815–1867' (PhD diss., King's College, London, 2023).

14. Quoted in Alfaro, 'Britain and the Cuban Question', 180.

15. Steven McGregor, 'Seward's Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, 1863–1866', *International History Review* 43, no. 5 (2021): 981–1000.

16. Quoted in Norman Dwight Harris, 'The Effect of the Balkan Wars on European Alliances and the Future of the Ottoman Empire', *Proceedings of the American Political Science Association* 10 (1914): 106.

17. See Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *The Other Great Game: The Opening of Korea and the Birth of Modern East Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023).

18. The classic account here is Christopher Clark, *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012). Norman Angell's book was first published in 1909 under the title *Europe's Optical Illusion*; for a modern edition, see Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion* (New York: Cosimo, 2007).

19. Joern Leonhard, *Der überforderte Frieden: Versailles und die Welt, 1918–1923* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2018); Robert Gerwarth, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

20. Brendan Simms, *Hitler: Only the World Was Enough* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), 347–394.

21. Quoted in Simms, *Hitler*, 293–294 (Roosevelt), 399 (Luce).

22. Brendan Simms, *Hitler*, 397–445; Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and the German March to Global War* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

23. See Gerry Simpson, 'The Great Powers, Sovereign Equality and the Making of the United Nations Charter: San Francisco 1945', in *Great Powers and Outlaw States: Unequal Sovereigns in the International Legal Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 165–193. The quotation is from Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 7.

24. Martin Daunton, *The Economic Government of the World, 1933–2023* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

25. The ideas of a post-imperial order are discussed in Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 11.

26. For the centrality of Great Power conflict to local struggles, see Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonial Conquest and Resistance* (London: Profile Books, 2020), 237 et passim.

27. For the economic growth see Raymond G. Stokes, *Ruins to Riches: The Economic Resurgence of Germany and Japan After 1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

28. Gregory Feifer, *The Great Gamble: The Soviet War in Afghanistan* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009).

29. Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

30. Joseph L. Nogee and John W. Spanier, 'The Politics of Tripolarity', *World Affairs* 139, no. 4 (1977): 319–333.

Chapter Three: The Eclipse of the Great Powers

1. For the diplomacy of this period, see Kristina Spohr, *Post Wall, Post Square: How Bush, Gorbachev, Kohl and Deng Shaped the World After 1989* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

2. For the great transformation of Eastern Europe, see Timothy Snyder, *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569–1999* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

3. Charles Krauthammer, 'The Unipolar Moment', *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990): 23–33.

4. John Mearsheimer, 'Back to the Future: Instability in Europe After the Cold War', *International Security* 15, no. 1 (1990): 6.

5. The figures for Volkswagen are from Elisabeth Braw, *Goodbye Globalisation: The Return of a Divided World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024), 31.

6. See the discussion in Susan Strange, *The Retreat of the State: The Diffusion of Power in the World Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Jürgen Habermas, *Die Einbeziehung des Anderen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), 213; Michael Mandelbaum, *The Ideas That Conquered the World: Peace, Democracy and Free Markets in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2002).

7. Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, 'Power and Interdependence in the Information Age', *Foreign Affairs* 77, no. 5 (1998): 81–94.

8. Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

9. US Department of State, 'Military Expenditures and Arms Transfers 1999–2000', Fact Sheet, Office of the Spokesman, US Department of State, February 6, 2003, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2003/17447.htm.

10. 'Joint Chinese-Russian Statement Adopted on December 10, 1999', *World Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2000): 148–153.

11. National Security Strategy of the United States, White House, September 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nssall.html.

12. The Sino-American trade figures are from ‘China’, in ‘2014 National Trade Estimate Report on Foreign Trade Barriers’, United States Trade Representative, 2014, https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2014%20NTE%20Report%20on%20FTB%20China.pdf (see https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/2014%20NTE%20Report%20on%20FTB.pdf for the full report).

13. ‘Dreaming with the BRICs: The Path to 2050’, Global Economics Paper no. 99, Goldman Sachs, October 2003, www.goldmansachs.com/pdfs/insights/archive/archive-pdfs/brics-dream.pdf. See also Amrita Narlikar, *New Powers: How to Become One and How to Manage Them* (London: Hurst, 2010).

14. Bergsten’s ideas are most easily accessible in C. Fred Bergsten, ‘A Partnership of Equals: How Washington Should Respond to China’s Economic Challenge’, *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 4 (2008): 57–69; Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, ‘“Chimerica” and the Global Asset Market Boom’, *International Finance* 10, no. 3 (2007): 215–239.

15. Adam Tooze, *Crashed: How a Decade of Financial Crises Changed the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2018); Helen Thompson, *China and the Mortgaging of America: Economic Interdependence and Domestic Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Jussi M. Hanhimäki, *Pax Transatlantica: America and Europe in the Post–Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

16. Brendan Simms, ‘Towards a Mighty Union: How to Create a Democratic European Superpower’, *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (2012): 49–62.

Chapter Four: The Return of ‘Peer Competition’

1. Niall Ferguson and Moritz Schularick, ‘Chimerica and the Global Asset Market Boom’, *International Finance* 10, no. 3 (2007): 215–239; Kishore Mahbubani, *The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), 2, 45, 111 (quotation, 2). For a celebration of ‘transnationalism’, see Akira Iriye, ‘The Making of a Transnational World’, in *Global Interdependence: The World After 1945*, ed. Akira Iriye (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 681–847.

2. National Security Strategy, White House, 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf, 1; Barry Buzan, ‘China in International Society: Is Peaceful Rise Possible?’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3, no. 10 (2010): 5–36.

3. Anthony Brenton, ‘“Great Powers” in Climate Politics’, *Climate Policy* 5 (2013): 541–546.

4. Vili Lehdonvirta, *Cloud Empires: How Digital Platforms Are Overtaking the State and How We Can Regain Control* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2022), 3. The German diplomat is quoted in Simon McDonald, *Beyond Britannia: Reshaping UK Foreign Policy* (London: Haus, 2023), 185.

5. Walter Russell Mead, ‘The Return of Geopolitics’, *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (2014): 69–79.

6. National Security Strategy of the United States of America, White House, December 2017, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf, 25 et passim; Condoleezza Rice and Amy Zegart, *Political Risk: Facing the Threat of Global Insecurity in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2019), 73. There was also a corresponding increase in the idea of ‘realpolitik’. See John Bew, *Realpolitik: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

7. Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim, and the Threat of Nuclear War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

8. Hanna Samir Kassab, *Globalization, Multipolarity and Great Power Competition* (London: Routledge, 2022); John Mearsheimer, ‘Bound to

Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order', *International Security* 43, no. 4 (2019): 7–50.

9. Jasper Becker, *Made in China: Wuhan, Covid and the Quest for Biotech Supremacy* (London: Hurst, 2021).

10. Michael Beckley, 'Enemies of My Enemy: How Fear of China Is Forging a New World Order', *Foreign Affairs*, February 14, 2022; 'U.S. Doesn't Accept "Spheres of Influence", Blinken Says in Comments Aimed at Russia', Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, May 6, 2021, www.rferl.org/a/u-s-doesn-t-accept-spheres-of-influence-blinken-says-in-comments-aimed-at-russia/31241682.html.

11. See Adam Entous, 'The Partnership: The Secret History of the War in Ukraine', *New York Times*, March 29, 2025; Adam Entous, 'Key Takeaways from America's Secret Military Partnership with Ukraine', *New York Times*, March 30, 2025; Adam Entous, 'How the U.S. Broke Its Own Rules to Help Ukraine', *New York Times*, March 30, 2025; Dimitry Peskow, quoted in Marc Bennetts, 'Long Live Russia', *The Times* (London), March 19, 2024, 28.

12. William Figueroa, 'China in Russia, Japan in Ukraine: Asian Powers Enter International Diplomacy', *The Diplomat*, March 22, 2023; 'Japan PM Warns "Today's Ukraine Could Be Tomorrow's East Asia"', France 24, October 4, 2024.

13. Quoted in Brendan Simms and John Nilsson-Wright, 'Why Britain Needs Asia', *New Statesman*, March 17, 2025. The phrase has also been attributed to Japan's legendary former diplomat Nobukatsu Kanehara. For a vivid account of the military challenges to the West in the European and Asian theatres, see Jim Sciutto, *The Return of Great Powers: Russia, China and the Next World War* (New York: Dutton, 2024).

14. Hal Brands, 'The Next Global War: How Today's Regional Conflicts Resemble the Ones That Produced World War II', *Foreign Affairs*, January 26, 2024.

15. Quoted in Mark Leonard, 'China Is Ready for a World of Disorder: America Is Not', *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 4 (July/August 2023): 116–120, 122–127.

16. See Patrick Wintour, 'Negative Views of Russia Mainly Limited to Western Liberal Democracies, Poll Shows', *The Guardian*, May 30, 2022.

17. Bruno Maçães, ‘World View: The Conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine Have Divided the World into Geopolitical Tribes’, *New Statesman*, November 17–23, 2023, 27. For Biden’s link between Hamas and Putin, see Faisal Devji, ‘Ukraine, Gaza and the International Order’, *Quincy Brief* 52 (February 6, 2024): 5.

18. Quoted in Tim Marshall, *The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2023), 107.

19. Chris Miller, *Chip War: The Fight for the World’s Most Critical Technology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2022); Sander Tordoir, ‘Can the EU Hold Back the Great Tech Decoupling?’, Centre for European Reform, May 3, 2024.

20. Quoted in Jami Miscik, Peter Orszag, and Theodore Bunzel, ‘Geopolitics in the C-Suite: More Than Ever, U.S. Foreign Policy Depends on Corporations—and Vice Versa’, *Foreign Affairs*, March 11, 2024; Bruno Maçães, *World Builders: Technology and the New Geopolitics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

21. Elisabeth Braw, *Goodbye Globalization: The Return of a Divided World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024); Alex Lawson, ‘Nord Stream I: Gazprom Announces Indefinite Shutdown of Pipeline’, *The Guardian*, September 2, 2022; Jonathan Josephs and Sameer Hashmi, ‘US Says Falling Trade with China Could Be Positive’, BBC News, March 1, 2024, www.bbc.com/news/business-68441427; Iain Martin, ‘David Petraeus on a New Age of Conflict’, *The Reaction* (podcast), March 11, 2023; João Vale de Almeida, *The Divorce of Nations: A Diplomat’s Inside View as the Global Order Collapses* (Cheltenham: Flint, 2025), 23.

22. Thomas D. Grant and F. Scott Kieff, ‘Great Powers and New Risks: What Businesses and Regulators Should Know About China’s Strategic Ambitions’, *Orbis* 65, no. 2 (2021); Michael Hochberg and Leonard Hochberg, ‘International Business Needs Grand Strategy’, *Journal of Competitiveness Studies* 28, no. 2 (2020): 102–119; Katie Prescott, ‘UK Strategy Is Unstable, Sunak Told’, *The Times* (London), November 28, 2023, 37.

23. Jack Barnett, ‘UK Firms Seek “Friendly” Supply Chains’, *The Times* (London), April 16, 2024.

24. James Kynge, Sun Yu, and Ryan McMorrow, ‘Shein Tries to Suppress Chair’s Claim That Fashion Retailer Is “American”’, *Financial Times*, June 14, 2024. See also Irwin Stelzer, ‘New Economic Order Turns Trade and Policy Maxims on Their Head’, *Sunday Times* (London), October 13, 2024.

25. Bernard Lagan, ‘Beijing Accused of Trying to Buy Up Pacific Power Base’, *The Times* (London), April 16, 2024, 28.

26. John Nilsson-Wright, ‘The Roots of South Korea’s Crisis’, *Engelsberg Ideas*, January 14, 2025.

27. Samir Puri, *Westlessness: The Great Global Rebalancing* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2024).

28. See T. V. Paul and Markus Kornprobst, eds., *The New Cold War and the Remaking of Regions* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025).

29. Edward Helmore, ‘Trump Inauguration: Zuckerberg, Bezos and Musk Seated in Front of Cabinet Pics’, *The Guardian*, January 20, 2025.

30. ‘Secretary of State Marco Rubio with Matthew Boyle for Breitbart News Network’, US Department of State, February 24, 2025, www.state.gov/secretary-of-state-marco-rubio-with-matthew-boyle-for-breitbart-news-network.

31. ‘Trump Tariffs: Treasury Secretary Urges Trading Partners Not to Retaliate’, *The Independent*, April 3, 2025.

32. Trump is quoted in ‘Donald Trump Says Countries “Kissing My Ass” over Tariffs’, *Newsweek*, April 9, 2025; Chidanand Rajghatta, ‘Tax Americana: Trump Terrifies the World and US with Global Tariffs’, *Times of India*, April 1, 2025.

Chapter Five: The Self-Restraint of Japan

1. George Feifer, *Breaking Open Japan: Commodore Perry, Lord Abe, and American Imperialism in 1853* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006).

2. Inouye is quoted in Richard Storry, *A History of Modern Japan* (London: Penguin, 1960), 17. For the phrase ‘Leave Asia, Join Europe’, see Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, ‘Nishida Kitarō and Muhammad ‘Abduh on God and Reason: Towards a Theology of Place’, *Asian Philosophy* 32, no. 2 (2022): 105–125. Komura is quoted in Ian Nish, *The Origins of the Russo-Japanese War* (London: Routledge, 1985), 159.

3. Okakura is quoted in S. C. M. Paine, *The Japanese Empire: Grand Strategy from the Meiji Restoration to the Pacific War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1.

4. See Antony Best, ‘“The Great Question of the World Today”: Britain, the Dominions, East Asian Immigration and the Threat of Race War, 1905–1911’, in *Race and Racism in Modern East Asia: Interactions, Nationalism, Gender and Lineage*, ed. Rotem Kowner and Walter Demel (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 184–187, 194–195 et passim; Eri Hotta, *Japan 1941: Countdown to Infamy* (New York: Vintage, 2013), 41.

5. Mori Ogai, ‘Under Reconstruction’, in *Modern Japanese Stories*, ed. Ivan Morris (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1989); Naoko Shimazu, *Japan, Race and Equality: The Racial Equality Proposal of 1919* (London: Routledge, 1998). More generally, see Steven Ward, ‘Race, Status and Japanese Revisionism in the Early 1930s’, *Security Studies* 22, no. 4 (2013): 607–639; Hotta, *Japan 1941*, 34–37 (quotation, 37).

6. Hornbeck is quoted in Michael A. Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War: The Search for Economic Security, 1919–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 62.

7. For Japan and Germany in World War I, see Barnhart, *Japan Prepares for Total War*, 267. Japan’s need for space is discussed in Louise Young, *Japan’s Total Empire: Manchuria and the Culture of Wartime Imperialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 316, 334.

8. Atsushi Moriyama, ‘The Southward Advance and Going to War with the United States: The Road to World War II’, in *Modern Japan’s Place in World History: From Meiji to Reiwa*, ed. Masayuki Yamauchi and Yuichi Hosoya (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2023).

9. Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and Germany's March to Global War* (London: Allen Lane, 2021); Brendan Simms and Steven McGregor, *The Silver Waterfall: How America Won the War in the Pacific at Midway* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2022).

10. The Diet's stipulations are discussed in Chiyuki Aoi, 'Asserting Civilian Power or Risking Irrelevance? Japan's Post–Cold War Policy Concerning the Use of Force', in *Global Governance: Germany and Japan in the International System*, ed. Saori N. Katada, Hanns W. Maull, and Takashi Inoguchi (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 113. Kosaka is quoted in Morinosuke Kajima, *Modern Japan's Foreign Policy* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1969), 52. See also John Swenson-Wright, *Unequal Allies? United States Security and Alliance Policy Towards Japan, 1945–1960* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

11. See H. Nakanishi, 'The Issue of Historical Perspective', in Yamauchi and Hosoya, *Modern Japan's Place in World History*, 163–164 (quotation, 164).

12. Akira Iriye and Robert A. Wampler, eds., *Partnership: The United States and Japan, 1951–2001* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2001).

13. See the figures in Saori Katada, 'New Courses in Japan's Foreign Aid Policy: More Humanitarian and More Nationalistic', in Katada et al., *Global Governance*, 182.

14. Ezra Vogel, *Japan as Number One: Lessons for America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).

15. See Hiroshi Nakanishi, 'The Gulf War and Japanese Diplomacy', Nippon.com, December 6, 2011, www.nippon.com/en/features/c00202.

16. Gillian Tett, *Saving the Sun: Shinsei and the Battle for Japan's Future* (London: Random House, 2004).

17. Thomas Berger, *Culture of Antimilitarism: National Security in Germany and Japan* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Roberta Haar, *Nation States and Schizophrenics: Germany and Japan as Post–Cold War Actors* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001). See also Hanns W. Maull, Saori N. Katada, and Takashi Inoguchi, 'German and Japanese Foreign Policies and Global Governance', in Katada et al., *Global Governance*, 1–2.

18. Murayama is quoted in Masaya Inoue, ‘Postwar Japan-China Relations’, in Yamauchi and Hosoya, *Modern Japan’s Place in World History*, 155. See also Daqing Yang, Jie Liu, and Andrew Gordon, eds., *Towards a History Beyond Borders: Contentious Issues in Sino-Japanese Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), and Hiro Saito, *The History Problem: The Politics of War Commemoration in East Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016).

19. Richard L. Armitage, Joseph S. Nye, chairs, ‘The United States and Japan: Advancing Toward a Mature Partnership’, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, October 11, 2000, https://spfusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ArmitageNyeReport_2000.pdf.

20. The issues facing Japan at that time are discussed in Katada et al., *Global Governance*, xiii (preface). None of the challenges listed concern Great Powers; the PRC does not feature at all. The PRC’s overtaking of Japan in terms of defence expenditure is discussed in Brad Williams, *Japanese Foreign Intelligence and Grand Strategy: From the Cold War to the Abe Era* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021), 51.

21. For Abe’s Great Power ambitions, see Hugo Dobson, ‘Is Japan Really Back? The Abe Doctrine and Global Governance’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 2 (2017): 199–224. See also Tobias Harris, *The Iconoclast: Shinzo Abe and the New Japan* (London: Hurst, 2020), 24, 52 (Abe quotation), 58, 216 et passim; Williams, *Japanese Foreign Intelligence and Grand Strategy*, 38.

22. Quoted in Harris, *Iconoclast*, 187; ‘Shinzo Abe, “Japan Is Back”’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, February 22, 2013, www.mofa.go.jp/announce/pm/abe/us_20130222en.html. See also ‘Japan is Back: A Conversation with Shinzo Abe’, *Foreign Affairs*, July–August 2013.

23. For the Great Power context to Abe’s domestic policy, see Harris, *Iconoclast*, 27; ‘National Security Strategy’, Cabinet Secretariat (Japan), December 17, 2013, www.cas.go.jp/jp/siryou/131217anzenhoshou/nss-e.pdf.

24. Quotations in Harris, *Iconoclast*, 42, 201.

25. ‘Statement by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’, Office of the Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, August 14, 2015,

https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201508/0814statement.html.

26. The classic account of Abe's foreign policy is Michael J. Green, *Line of Advantage: Japan's Grand Strategy in the Era of Abe Shinzo* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022). The Abe quotations are in Shinzo Abe, 'A New Vision from a New Japan, World Economic Forum 2014 Annual Meeting, Speech by Prime Minister Abe', Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, January 22, 2014, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/96_abe/statement/201401/22speech_e.html; Dobson, 'Is Japan Really Back?', 203–204; in Harris, *Iconoclast*, 5.

27. Williams, *Japanese Foreign Intelligence and Grand Strategy*, 52.

28. Quoted in 'Afterword', in Yamauchi and Hosoya, *Modern Japan's Place in World History*, 178.

29. Yuichi Hosoya, 'Japan', in *East Asia's Grand Strategies: A Twelve-Case Comparison*, ed. Ramon Pacheco Pardo and Jung H. Pak (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2025), 46–67.

30. The Advisory Panel on the History of the 20th Century and on Japan's Role and the World Order in the 21st Century, *Toward the Abe Statement on the 70th Anniversary of the End of World War II: Lessons from the 20th Century and a Vision for the 21st Century for Japan*, trans. Tara Cannon (Tokyo: Japan Publishing Industry Foundation for Culture, 2017); H. Nakanishi, 'The Issue of Historical Perspective from the Post-Heisei Era: Looking Back at Meiji from the Postwar Period, and Looking Ahead', in Yamauchi and Hosoya, *Modern Japan's Place in World History*, 170.

31. Yuichi Hosoya, 'FOIP 2.0: The Evolution of Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy', *Asia-Pacific Review* 26, no. 1 (2019): 18–28; Shinzo Abe, '"Toward an Alliance of Hope": Address to a Joint Meeting of the U.S. Congress by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe', Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet, April 29, 2015, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/97_abe/statement/201504/uscongress.html.

32. 'Grand Design and Action Plan for a New Form of Capitalism, 2023 Revised Version', Government of Japan, June 16, 2023, www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/atarashii_sihonsyugi/pdf/ap2023en.pdf, 2.

33. George Wright, 'Japan PM Says Country on the Brink over Falling Birth Rate', BBC News, January 23, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-64373950.

34. Garren Mulloy, *Defenders of Japan: The Post-Imperial Armed Forces, 1946–2016* (London: Hurst, 2021).

35. See Sheila Smith, *Japan Rearmed: The Politics of Military Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), esp. 236–240; Richard J. Samuels, *Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019), 257–262 et passim.

36. See ‘Summary of the Results of an Opinion Poll on Japan in ASEAN in FY2023’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Japan, March 15, 2024, www.mofa.go.jp/files/100635558.pdf. See also Guibourg Delamotte, *Le Japon: Un leader discret* (Paris: Eyrolles, 2023), which notes the country’s strong standing in South-East Asia.

37. Wolf is quoted in Paul Hodges, ‘Demographics Drive Demand and Fertility Rates Have Fallen’, *Financial Times*, March 16, 2014.

Chapter Six: The Travails of France

1. De Gaulle is quoted in Tony Barber, ‘France Invokes the Golden Age of De Gaulle’, *Financial Times,* November 18, 2021. The French expert is Jean-Dominique Merchet, ‘Miroir, mon beau miroir, dis-moi si je suis encore une grande puissance?’, *L’Opinion*, September 20, 2021.

2. Avi Shlaim, ‘Prelude to Downfall: The British Offer of Union to France, June 1940’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 3 (July 1974): 27–63.

3. Quoted in Pascal Boniface, *Is France Still a Great Power?* (Kingston, Ontario: Queen’s University, Centre for International Relations, 2000), 50.

4. Quoted in Boniface, *Is France Still a Great Power?*, 49.

5. Charles de Gaulle, *War Memoirs* (London: Collins, 1955), introduction. See also Philip G. Cerny, *The Politics of Grandeur: Ideological Aspects of de Gaulle’s Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

6. Philippe Delmas, *De la prochaine guerre avec l’Allemagne* (Paris: Jacob, 1999).

7. Nicolas Baverez, *La France qui tombe* (Paris: Perrin, 2003).

8. Quoted in Theo Farrell, Sten Rynning, and Terry Terriff, *Transformng Military Power Since the Cold War: Britain, France and the United States, 1991–2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 214.

9. Quoted in Marius-Mircea Mitrache and Sergiu Miscoiu, ‘The Mental Maps of French Foreign Policy: Between Ambitions of Grandeur and Constraints of Multipolarity in the Twenty-First Century’, in *Great Powers’ Foreign Policy: Approaching the Global Competition and the Russian War Against the West*, ed. Valentin Naumescu (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 204; Adrian Treacher, ‘Europe as a Power Multiplier for French Security Policy: Strategic Consistency, Tactical Adaptation’, *European Security* 10, no. 1 (2001): 22–44.

10. Quoted in Stanley Hoffmann, ‘The Nation, Nationalism and After: The Case of France’, Tanner Lectures on Human Values, Princeton University, March 3–4, 1993, 271.

11. Michael E. Porter and Klaus Schwab, *The Global Competitiveness Report, 2008–2009*, World Economic Forum, 2008, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalCompetitivenessReport_2008

-09.pdf; Klaus Schwab, *The Global Competitiveness Report, 2013–2014*, World Economic Forum, 2013, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GlobalCompetitivenessReport_2013-14.pdf. See also Bruno Lanvin, 'France's Battle for Competitiveness', Institut Européen d'Administration des Affaires, January 7, 2014, https://knowledge.insead.edu/economics-finance/frances-battle-competitiveness.

12. Emile Chabal, 'The Rise of the Anglo-Saxon: French Perceptions of the Anglo-American World in the Long Twentieth Century', *French Politics, Culture and Society* 31, no. 1 (2013): 24–46.

13. Speech by Jean-Yves Le Drian, Conference of Ambassadors, Paris, August 29, 2019, 8; 'Emmanuel Warns Europe: NATO Is Becoming Brain-Dead', *The Economist*, November 7, 2019, 19–24.

14. National Strategic Review 2022, French Secretariat-General for National Defence and Security, 2022, www.sgdsn.gouv.fr/files/files/rns-uk-20221202.pdf; quoted in 'France's Power Is Questioned After Failed Submarine Deal', *New York Times*, October 29, 2021.

15. See Frédéric Bozo, *French Foreign Policy Since 1945: An Introduction* (New York: Berghahn, 2016), 189.

16. Christian Lequesne, 'French Foreign and Security Challenges After the Paris Terrorist Attacks', *Contemporary Security Policy* 37, no. 2 (2016): 306–318, esp. 310–311.

17. Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

18. Quoted in Mitrache and Miscoiu, 'Mental Maps of French Foreign Policy', 234.

19. See Jeffrey Lewis and Bruno Tertrais, 'The Thick Red Line: Implications of the 2013 Chemical Weapons Crisis for Deterrence and Transatlantic Relations', *Survival* 59, no. 6 (2017): 77–108, 92, for French disappointment with the United States and the United Kingdom.

20. Macron is quoted in 'Macron: Deutschlands wirtschaftliche Stärke "nicht mehr tragbar"', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 17, 2014.

21. For the broad outline of Macron's project, see Emmanuel Macron, *Revolution*, trans. Jonathan Goldberg and Juliette R. Scott (London: Scribe, 2017), esp. 214–219; Charles Bremner, 'Macron Talks to Europe in State Address', *The Times* (London), January 2, 2018.

22. Quoted in Ronja Kempin, ed., ‘France’s Foreign and Security Policy Under President Macron: The Consequences for Franco-German Cooperation’, SWP Research Paper 4, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, May 2021, 23.

23. Defence and National Security Strategic Review 2017, French Ministry of the Armed Forces, 2017, https://franceintheus.org/IMG/pdf/defense_and_national_security_strategic_review_2017.pdf, 10.

24. ‘Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on Receiving the Charlemagne Prize’, Élysée, May 10, 2018, www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/10/speech-by-m-emmanuel-macron-president-of-the-republic-on-receiving-the-charlemagne-prize-1; *Nouvelle Revue Française* is quoted in Juerg Altwegg, ‘Macron im Mai’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, May 4, 2018.

25. Macron, *Revolution*, 184, 190.

26. For ‘Lisbon to Vladivostok’, see Lara Marlowe, ‘Harmony and Discord as Macron Meets Putin in the South of France’, *Irish Times*, August 19, 2019.

27. Céline Pajon, ‘France’s Indo-Pacific Strategy and the Quad Plus’, *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs* 3, no. 5 (2020): 168–169.

28. Macron is quoted in Leila Abboud, Sarah White, and Henry Foy, ‘Macron’s Taiwan Stance Provokes Outcry’, *Financial Times*, April 11, 2023, 5.

29. Tony Chafer, ‘France in Mali: Towards a New Africa Strategy?’, *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 19, no. 2 (2016): 119–141; Stefano Recchia, ‘A Legitimate Sphere of Influence: Understanding France’s Turn to Multilateralism in Africa’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 4 (2020): 508–553. Macron on Europe’s southern border is quoted in ‘France’s Action in the Sahel’, Consulate General of France in Johannesburg, February 17, 2022, https://johannesburg.consulfrance.org/France-s-action-in-the-Sahel.

30. Rivaton is quoted in Simon Kuper, ‘The UK, France and Me’, *Le Monde*, July 25, 2022; Lisa O’Carroll and Daniel Boffey, ‘French Fishers Threaten to Blockade Jersey Ports as Row Escalates: Move Comes as

France Threatens to Cut Off Electricity to Island in Row over Post-Brexit Licences for Fishing Boats', *The Guardian*, May 5, 2021.

31. Defence and National Security Strategic Review, 2017, 59; 'Emmanuel Macron in His Own Words: The French President's Interview with The Economist' (transcript), *The Economist*, November 7, 2019 (the interview was on October 21, 2019), www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-in-his-own-words-english.

32. Sophie Pedder, *Revolution Française: Emmanuel Macron and the Quest to Reinvent a Nation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018), 242–243; Ronald Tiersky, 'Macron's World: How the New President Is Remaking France', *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 1 (2018): 93.

33. A good example of a panegyric to Macron is Mark Leonard, 'Brave New Europe', *New York Review of Books*, November 9, 2017, 46–48; Celine Marange and Susan Stewart, 'French and German Approaches to Russia: Convergence Yes, EU Compatibility No', Chatham House Research Paper, Russia and Eurasia Programme, London, November 2021.

34. Nabila Ramdani, *Fixing France: How to Repair a Broken Republic* (London: Hurst, 2023).

35. Ifo Institute for Economic Research, 'German Economists Criticise Macron's Proposals', press release, May 17, 2018; interview with Angela Merkel, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, quoted in Matthew Karnitschnig and Pierre Briançon, 'Angela Merkel Dashes Emmanuel Macron's Eurozone Dreams', Politico, June 4, 2018, www.politico.eu/article/an-offer-emmanuel-macron-cant-refuse-eurozone-budget-angela-merkel; Anne-Sylvaine Chassany and Guy Chazan, 'The Franco-German Puzzle', *Financial Times*, June 29, 2018.

36. Bart M.J. Szewczyk, 'Macron's European Vision Crashed and Burned in Ukraine', *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2022.

37. Pascal Lorot, *La France dans le grand jeu mondial: Pour un nouveau leadership* (Paris: Hermann, 2022), 17, 74.

38. Ulrich Wickert, *Salut les Amis: Meine Geschichte der deutsch-französischen Beziehungen* (Munich: Piper, 2024), 177; Jacques Attali, 'War Between France and Germany Becomes Possible Again', Attali.com, October 26, 2022.

39. See Jean-Dominique Merchet, *Sommes-nous prêts pour la guerre? L'illusion de la puissance française* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2024).

40. See Olivier Schmitt and Elie Tenenbaum, '"Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place": The French Army, Expeditionary Warfare and the Return of Strategic Competition', in *Advanced Land Warfare*, ed. Mikael Weissmann and Niklas Nilsson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

41. Laurent Bansept, 'French Special Operations: What Is Their Role in the Context of Great Power Competition?', *Briefings de L'IFRI*, Security Studies Center, January 27, 2022; Olivier Schmitt, 'L'épée et la Carte: Les forces armées et la présence française dans le monde', in *La France dans le monde*, ed. Frédéric Charillon (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2021). For figures, see 'Operational Commitments of the French Armed Forces', Ministry for Armed Forces (France), January 22, 2025, www.defense.gouv.fr/operations/operations-militaires/operational-commitments-of-the-french-armed-forces.

42. Lorot, *La France dans le grand jeu mondial*, 120; Macron, *Revolution*, 39, 179, 182; 'Full Transcript of Emmanuel Macron Speech', BBC, May 8, 2017, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39842084.

43. Charles Bremner and Adam Sage, 'Landslide for Macron', *The Times* (London), May 8, 2017, 1; Edward Lucas, 'The Security of Europe Depends on Macron', *The Times* (London), May 12, 2017; 'The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power', Portland Communications, 2015, https://portland-communications.com/pdf/The-Soft-Power_30.pdf.

44. Speech by Jean-Yves Le Drian, Conference of Ambassadors, Paris, August 29, 2019, 13.

45. Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot, *Le déclassement français* (Paris: Michel Lafon, 2022). The authors refer specifically to France's loss of influence in the Middle East and North Africa.

Chapter Seven: The Self-Denial of Germany

1. See Brendan Simms, *Europe: The Struggle for Supremacy, 1453 to the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), passim (quotation, 7).

2. For the legacy of the Thirty Years' War, see Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years' War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), and Herfried Münkler, *Der Dreißigjährige Krieg: Europäische Katastrophe, deutsches Trauma, 1618–1648* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2017).

3. Brendan Simms, *The Struggle for Mastery in Germany, 1779–1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Brendan Simms, *The Impact of Napoleon: Prussian High Politics, Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Executive, 1797–1806* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

4. For the revolutions, see Christopher Clark, *Revolutionary Spring: Fighting for a New World, 1848–1849* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

5. Quoted in Timothy Garton Ash, *In Europe's Name: Germany and the Divided Continent* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 384.

6. Christopher Clark, *Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

7. Quoted in Milan Hauner, 'Did Hitler Want a World Dominion?', *Journal of Contemporary History* 1 (1978): 16.

8. 'Schuman Declaration, May 1950', European Union, https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/history-eu/1945-59/schuman-declaration-may-1950_en.

9. The concept of semi-sovereignty is explored in Peter Katzenstein, *Policy and Politics in Germany: The Growth of a Semi-Sovereign State* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987).

10. For Germany and the NPT, see Marc Trachtenberg, *A Constructed Peace: The Making of the European Settlement, 1945–1963* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).

11. Quoted in Leon Hurwitz and Christian Lequesne, *The State of the European Community: Policies, Institutions and Debates in the Transition Years* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers; Harlow, UK: Longman, 1991), 409.

12. William Wallace, 'Germany at the Centre of Europe', in *The Federal Republic of Germany: The End of an Era*, ed. Eva Kolinsky (New York:

Berg, 1991), 170; Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'Beware, the Reich Is Reviving', *The Times* (London), October 31, 1989.

13. Brendan Simms, 'From the Kohl to the Fischer Doctrine: Germany and the Wars of the Yugoslav Succession, 1991–1999', *German History* 21, no. 3 (2003): 393–414; Wulf Kansteiner, 'Losing the War, Winning the Memory Battle: The Legacy of Nazism, World War II, and the Holocaust in the Federal Republic of Germany', in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, ed. Wulf Kansteiner, C. Fogu, and R. Ned Lebow (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 102–146. Schröder is quoted in William E. Paterson, 'The Reluctant Hegemon? Germany Moves Centre Stage in the European Union', *Journal of Common Market Studies* 49, no. 1 (2011): 62.

14. Quoted in Christoph Raab, 'Deutschlands sicherheitspolitische Rolle im 21. Jahrhundert: Ein Plädoyer für eine Anpassung des Sicherheitsbegriffs', in *Internationale Sicherheit im 21. Jahrhundert: Deutschlands internationale Verantwortung*, ed. James Bindenagel, Matthias Herdegen, and Karl Kaiser (Bonn: V&R Unipress, 2016), 78.

15. For the tribulations of the German army, see Sönke Neitzel, *Die Bundeswehr: Von der Wiederbewaffnung bis zur Zeitenwende* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2025), 102–104. Rödder's remarks were made at a conference in Mainz in May 2023.

16. Stefan Quandt and Alexander Schröder, eds., *Deutsche und Europäische Sicherheits- und Verteidigungspolitik* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2014) contains speeches by the president of the Bundestag, a regional president, and the interior and defence ministers from the years 2008 to 2010. None of them mentioned Russia as a serious threat. The economic connection is exposed in Reinhard Bingener and Markus Wehner, *Die Moskau Connection: Das Schröder-Netzwerk und Deutschlands Weg in die Abhängigkeit* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2023). For two somewhat contrasting views of the recent German-Russian relationship, see Bastian Matteo Scianna, *Sonderzug nach Moskau: Geschichte der deutschen Russlandpolitik seit 1990* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2014), and Stefan Creuzberger, *Das deutsch-russische Jahrhundert: Geschichte einer besonderen Beziehung* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2022).

17. Jan-Otmar Hesse, *Exportweltmeister: Geschichte einer deutschen Obsession* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2023).

18. Hans-Werner Sinn, *Der Euro: Von der Friedensidee zum Zankapfel* (Munich: Carl Hanser, 2015).

19. The historical roots of German policy are discussed in Anti Seppo, *From Guilt to Responsibility and Beyond: The Evolution of German Strategic Culture After the End of the Cold War* (Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts, 2021).

20. See Eric Gujer, *Schluss mit der Heuchelei: Deutschland ist eine Grossmacht* (Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2007); Matthew Kaminski, 'Europe's Indispensable Nation: Germany Gets the World's Most Thankless Job', *Wall Street Journal*, December 13, 2012; Hans Kundnani, *The Paradox of German Power* (London: Hurst, 2014).

21. Herfried Münkler, *Macht in der Mitte: Die neuen Aufgaben Deutschlands in Europa* (Hamburg: Edition Körber-Stiftung, 2015). The quotations are from Herfried Münkler, 'Germany's New Role in Europe', Deutschland.de, June 18, 2015, www.deutschland.de/en/topic/politics/germany-europe/germanys-new-role-in-europe; Paterson, 'Reluctant Hegemon?', 57–75.

22. Hanns W. Maull, 'Deutschland als Zivilmacht', in *Handbuch zur deutschen Außenpolitik*, ed. Siegmar Schmidt, Gunther Hellmann, and Reinhard Wolf (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2007). See also Josef Joffe, *Der gute Deutsche: Die Karriere einer moralischen Supermacht* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 2018).

23. Joachim Gauck, 'Germany's Role in the World: Reflections on Responsibility, Norms and Alliances', speech at the opening of the Munich Security Conference, Munich, January 31, 2014, Bundespräsidialamt (Federal Presidential Office), www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/JoachimGauck/Reden/2014/140131-Munich-Security-Conference.html.

24. Angela Merkel, 'Policy Statement by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel on the Situation in Ukraine', press release, March 13, 2014, Auswärtiges Amt (Federal Foreign Office), www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/newsroom/news/140314-merkel-ukraine-260760.

25. Ting Lan, Galen Sher, and Jing Zhou, 'The Economic Impacts on Germany of a Potential Russian Gas Shutoff', International Monetary Fund (IMF) Working Paper WP/22/144, IMF, July 2022,

www.imf.org/-/media/files/publications/wp/2022/english/wpiea2022144-print-pdf.pdf, 16.

26. ‘Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific’, Auswärtiges Amt (Federal Foreign Office), September 1, 2020, www.auswaertiges-amt.de/resource/blob/2380514/f9784f7e3b3fa1bd7c5446d274a4169e/200901-indo-pazifik-leitlinien--1--data.pdf.

27. Christoph Heusgen and Friedrich Schröder, ‘Für eine Reform des UN-Sicherheitsrats’, *Internationale Politik*, March 1, 2021.

28. See Gregor Schöllgen and Gerhard Schröder, *Letzte Chance: Warum wir jetzt eine neue Weltordnung brauchen* (Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 2021).

29. ‘Robust. Resilient. Sustainable. Integrated Security for Germany. National Security Strategy’, foreword, Bundesregierung (Federal Government), 2023, www.nationalesicherheitsstrategie.de/National-Security-Strategy-EN.pdf.

30. Kauder is quoted in Paul Lever, *Berlin Rules: Europe and the German Way* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1; Brendan Simms and Emmanuel Comte, ‘The European Union of the German Nation’, in *Discussing Pax Germanica: The Rise and Limits of German Hegemony in European Integration*, ed. Emmanuel Comte and Fernando Guirao (Abingdon: Routledge, 2025), 9–24.

31. On Germany and Russia, see Marco Siddi, ‘A Contested Hegemon? Germany’s Leadership in EU Relations with Russia’, *German Politics* 29, no. 1 (2020): 97–114.

32. On the EU budget, see Magnus G. Schoeller and Gerda Falkner, eds., ‘Special Issue: Germany, the “New Hanseatic League” and the Role of the Smaller States in Economic and Monetary Union’, *German Politics* 31, no. 2 (2022).

33. Radosław Sikorski, ‘I Fear Germany’s Power Less Than Her Inactivity’, *Financial Times*, November 28, 2011.

34. Jon Henley, ‘Angela Merkel: EU Cannot Completely Rely on US and Britain Any More’, *The Guardian*, May 28, 2017.

35. For the drama as it unfolded, see Stefan Lamby, *Ernstfall: Regieren in Zeiten des Krieges* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2023); Carlo Masala, *Bedingt Abwehrbereit: Deutschlands Schwäche in der Zeitenwende* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2023), 11.

36. Olaf Scholz, ‘The Global Zeitenwende: How to Avoid a New Cold War in a Multipolar Era’, *Foreign Affairs*, December 5, 2022, 1. Klingbeil is quoted in Benedikt Dietrich, ‘Klingbeil: Deutschland muss den Anspruch einer Führungsmacht haben’, *Vorwärts*, June 21, 2022. For the wider historical framing of this debate, see Herfried Münkler, *Macht im Umbruch: Deutschlands Rolle in Europa und die Herausforderungen des 21. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Rowohlt, 2025).

37. Thomas Sigmund, ‘Die Zeitlupenwende des Olaf Scholz’, *Handelsblatt*, March 31, 2022; ‘Die Zukunft der Zeitenwende’, *Internationale Politik*, IP Special 1 (2024).

38. Neitzel is quoted in Oliver Moody, ‘Europe Would Be “Washed Away” in War with Russia’, *The Times* (London), December 1, 2023; Masala, *Bedingt Abwehrbereit*, 57; Benjamin Tallis, ‘The Zeitenwende Is Here, It’s Just Unevenly Distributed’, *Internationale Politik Quarterly*, April 3, 2023.

39. For German public opinion, see Leonard Schütte, ‘Wer A sagt, muss auch B sagen: Die Widersprüchlichkeiten der Unterstützung in der deutschen Bevölkerung für die Ukraine’, *MSC Analysis* 1 (2024), https://securityconference.org/publikationen/analyses/wer-a-sagt-muss-auch-b-sagen.

40. See Ajit Niranjan, ‘EU Spends More on Russian Oil and Gas Than Financial Aid to Ukraine’, *The Guardian*, February 24, 2025; ‘Rückblick: Gasversorgung im Jahr 2022’, Bundesnetzagentur.de, 2023, www.bundesnetzagentur.de/DE/Gasversorgung/a_Gasversorgung_2022/start.html.

41. Sander Tordoir, ‘How German Industry Can Survive the Second China Shock’, Centre for European Reform, January 16, 2025, www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2025/how-german-industry-can-survive-second-china-shock.

42. Olaf Scholz, ‘The Global Zeitenwende’, 15; Ola Källenius, quoted in Masala, *Bedingt Abwehrbereit*, 167; Bruno Kahl, quoted in Sarah Marsh, ‘German Spy Chief: “Russia Is the Storm, China Is Climate Change”’, Reuters, October 17, 2022, www.reuters.com/world/german-spy-chief-russia-is-storm-china-is-climate-change-2022-10-17.

43. Christoph Heusgen, *Führung und Verantwortung: Angela Merkels Außenpolitik und Deutschlands künftige Rolle in der Welt* (Munich: Siedler,

2023), 12.

44. Rüdiger von Fritsch, *Welt im Umbruch: Was kommt nach dem Krieg?* (Berlin: Aufbau, 2023), 191. For scenarios, see Erich Vad, *Ernstfall für Deutschland: Ein Handbuch gegen den Krieg* (Neu-Isenburg: Westend, 2024), 29, 37. Vad's view that Germany is unprepared is shared by Carlo Masala, *Wenn Russland gewinnt: Ein Szenario* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2025), even if the two men otherwise do not see eye to eye on the Russian threat. For Germany's mental unreadiness, see Wolfgang Ischinger, *Welt in Gefahr: Deutschland und Europa in unsicheren Zeiten* (Berlin: Ullstein Taschenbuch, 2002), 9, 19, et passim. Germany's hesitation over Syria is critiqued in Sönke Neitzel and Bastian Matteo Scianna, *Blutige Enthaltung: Deutschlands Rolle im Syrienkrieg* (Freiburg: Herder, 2021).

45. Körber Stiftung, 'The Berlin Pulse', November 2023.

46. Achim Wohlgethan and Martin Specht, *Blackbox Bundeswehr: Die 100 -Milliarden-Illusion—Was unsere Truppe jetzt wirklich braucht* (Berlin: Econ, 2023), 14–16 et passim; Torben Schuetz, 'Die Zukunft nachträglich umsetzen: Bundeswehrstruktur in der Zeitenwende', in *Deutschlands Verteidigungspolitik: Nationale Sicherheit nach der Zeitendwende*, ed. Malte Riemann and Georg Loefflmann (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2023), 73–83; Julia Berghofer, *Der neue kalte Krieg: Atomwaffen, Cyberattacken, hybride Gefahren. Wie der Westen der neuen Bedrohung begegnen muss* (Cologne: Quadriga, 2023), 54–59.

47. Brand Finance, Global Soft Power Index 2022, https://brandfinance.com/press-releases/global-soft-power-index-2022-usa-bounces-back-better-to-top-of-nation-brand-ranking; Frank Uekötter, *The Greenest Nation: A New History of German Environmentalism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Trevelyan Wing, 'Why Germany Ditched Nuclear Before Coal—and Why It Won't Go Back', The Conversation, April 23, 2024, https://theconversation.com/why-germany-ditched-nuclear-before-coal-and-why-it-wont-go-back-228212.

48. Kristina Lunz, *Die Zukunft der Außenpolitik ist feministisch: Wie globale Krisen gelöst werden müssen* (Berlin: Econ, 2022).

49. 'Compass for the Future of Internationalisation', press release, German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), January 23, 2025, www.daad.de/en/the-daad/communication-publications/press/press_releases/daad-strategie-2030-veroeffentlicht.

50. For Germany’s low resilience, see Masala, *Bedingt Abwehrbereit*, 67.

51. For the decline in Merkel’s reputation, see John Ryan, ‘Merkel’s Problematic Legacy for Germany’, Aspenia Online, January 12, 2024, https://aspeniaonline.it/merkels-problematic-legacy-for-germany.

Chapter Eight: The Stalling of India

1. T. V. Paul, *The Unfinished Quest: India's Search for Major Power Status from Nehru to Modi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024); 'Next Five Years Is Time to Regain India's Lost Position in World: PM Modi', *Times of India*, May 19, 2019.

2. The case for the prosecution (of the Raj) is made in Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (London: Hurst, 2017).

3. See Jolita Zabarskaite, *'Greater India' and the Indian Expansionist Imagination, c. 1885–1965: The Rise and Decline of the Idea of a Lost Hindu Empire* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

4. Itty Abraham, *How India Became Territorial: Foreign Policy, Diaspora, Geopolitics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014). I have profited greatly from discussing this subject with my student Ved Shinde, who has made a special study of it.

5. Jaishankar is quoted in Rohan Mukherjee, *Ascending Order: Rising Powers and the Politics of Status in International Institutions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 26. Nehru is quoted in Manish S. Dabhade, 'India's Pursuit of United Nations Security Council Reforms', *Rising Powers Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (2017): 65, and in Ashley J. Tellis, 'Grasping Greatness: Making India into a Leading Power', in *Grasping Greatness: Making India a Leading Power*, ed. Bibek Debroy, C. Rahamohan, and Ashley J. Tellis (New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2023), 3.

6. On the region generally, see Avinash Paliwal, *India's Near East: A New History* (London: Hurst, 2024). For the Nehru quotations, see Vinod Khobragade, 'India-Nepal Relations', *World Affairs* 20, no. 3 (2016): 146–163.

7. Francine Frankel, *When Nehru Looked East: Origins of India-US Suspicion and India-China Rivalry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

8. Anton Harder, 'Not at the Cost of China: New Evidence Regarding US Proposals to Nehru for Joining the United Nations Security Council', Working Paper No. 76, Cold War International History Project (2015).

9. George Perkovich, *India's Nuclear Bomb: The Impact on Global Proliferation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

10. Indira Gandhi, quoted in T. V. Paul, *Unfinished Quest*, 133; James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, ‘India’s “Monroe Doctrine” and Asia’s Maritime Future’, *Strategic Analysis* 32, no. 6 (2008): 997–1011.

11. The defence minister is quoted in Ian Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019), 33.

12. See, generally, Baldev Raj Nayar and T. V. Paul, *India in the World Order: Searching for Major Power Status* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and Stephen P. Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2001). The Bush administration is quoted in Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 133. Singh is quoted in T. V. Paul, *Unfinished Quest*, 99.

13. The Indian foreign minister is quoted in Paul, *Unfinished Quest*, 156. For India and Africa, see Amrita Narlikar, ‘India’s Rise to Power: Where Does East Africa Fit In?’, *Review of African Political Economy* 37, no. 126 (2010): 451–464.

14. See Andrew Hurrell and Amrita Narlikar, ‘A New Politics of Confrontation? Brazil and India in Multilateral Trade Negotiations’, *Global Society* 20, no. 4 (2006): 415–433.

15. ‘Speech by National Security Advisor at IAFAC on “India in the 21st Century World”’, February 12, 2014, Indian Association of Foreign Affairs Correspondents, at Indian Ministry of External Affairs, www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/22898.

16. Quoted in Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 83.

17. Ramachandra Guha, ‘The Cult of Modi: How India’s Prime Minister Dismantled the World’s Largest Democratic Experiment’, *Foreign Policy*, Winter 2023, 32.

18. BJP manifesto, quoted in Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 83, 150S; Jaishankar, ‘IISS Fullerton Lecture’, Singapore, July 20, 2015, at Indian Ministry of External Affairs, Media Center, www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/25493/IISS_Fullerton_Lecture_by_Dr_S_Jaishankar_Foreign_Secretary_in_Singapore. See also Debroy et al., *Grasping Greatness*.

19. The Ministry of External Affairs is quoted in Dabhade, ‘India’s Pursuit of United Nations Security Council Reforms’, 64, 68; Modi is quoted in Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 63.

20. The statistics on defence spending are in Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 135, and the contentious map is discussed in Jon Reed, 'India's New Map Ruffles Regional Feathers', *Financial Times*, June 12, 2023.

21. Quoted in Ian Hall, 'Narendra Modi and India's Normative Power', *International Affairs* 93, no. 1 (2017): 113–131, 127.

22. Modi is quoted in Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 38.

23. Modi is quoted in T. V. Paul, *Unfinished Quest*, 28.

24. Quoted in Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*, 4; See also Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China, and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

25. Bertil Lintner, *The Costliest Pearl: China's Struggle for India's Ocean* (London: Hurst, 2019).

26. Abhijit Singh and James J. Wirtz, 'The Indian Ocean: The Rise of the US-India Partnership', in *The New Age of Naval Power in the Indo-Pacific: Strategy, Order and Regional Security*, ed. Catherine L. Grant, Alessio Palatano, and James A. Russell (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023), 282.

27. Alex Wong is quoted in Singh and Wirtz, 'The Indian Ocean', 279.

28. Rahul Roy-Chaudhury and Emile Hokayem, 'Understanding India and the UAE's Abstentions over Ukraine', International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), March 3, 2022, www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2022/03/understanding-india-and-the-uaes-abstentions-over-ukraine; Alistair Dawber, 'Biden Woos Narendra Modi to Forge a New Special Relationship', *The Times* (London), June 23, 2023, 26; Boris Rykin, 'Can India Be Decoupled from Russia?', *Daily Telegraph*, July 12, 2023.

29. On the Delhi summit, see Shruti Kapila, 'Modi's New World Order', *New Statesman*, September 11, 2023.

30. Paul, *Unfinished Quest*, 49.

31. Sumit Ganguly and William R. Thompson, *Ascending India and Its State Capacity: Extraction, Violence and Legitimacy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

32. Shashank Joshi, *Indian Power Projection: Ambition, Arms and Influence*, RUSI Whitehall Paper 85 (London: Routledge, 2015), 78–95. See also Walter C. Ladwig, 'India and Military Power Projection: Will the Land of Gandhi Become a Conventional Great Power?', *Asian Survey* 50, no. 6 (2010): 1162–1183.

33. Panikkar is quoted in Harsh V. Pant and Ivan Lidarev, 'India and Maritime Governance: The Indian Ocean Dynamic', in *India and Global Governance: A Rising Power and Its Discontents*, ed. Harsh V. Pant (London: Routledge, 2022), 178.

34. James Landale, 'Hardeep Singh Nijjar: Why Western Nations Fear India-Canada Row', BBC News, September 19, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-66856568.

35. Jacqui Goddard and Penelope Macrae, 'India Lands on the Dark Side of the Moon', *The Times* (London), August 24, 2024.

36. Avinash Paliwal, *India's Near East: A New History* (London: Hurst, 2024).

37. For the size of the Foreign Service, see Hall, *Modi and the Reinvention of Indian Foreign Policy*.

38. Raj Kumar Sharma, 'BRICS in India's Vision for Global Governance', in Pant, *India and Global Governance*, 138; Shashi Tharoor, 'India as a Soft Power', *India International Centre Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2011): 330–343.

39. Carole Dieterich and Sophie Landrin, 'L'Inde, puissance mondiale aux pieds d'argile', *Le Monde*, September 10–11, 2023, 14; Nitin Kumar Bharti, Lucas Chancel, Thomas Piketty, and Anmol Somanchi, 'Income and Wealth Inequality in India, 1922–2023: The Rise of the Billionaire Raj', Working Paper No. 2024/09, World Inequality Lab, March 2024.

40. The scale of the crisis is addressed by Ashoka Mody, *India Is Broken: A People Betrayed, Independence to Today* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

41. See the brutal accounting in Vappala Balachandran, *India and China at Odds in the Asian Century: A Diplomatic and Strategic History* (London: Hurst, 2025), 275–304 et passim.

Chapter Nine: The Failure of the European Union

1. The phrase ‘holiday from history’ was coined by the American columnist George Will. See George F. Will, ‘The End of Our Holiday from History’, *Washington Post*, September 11, 2001, www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/2001/09/12/the-end-of-our-holiday-from-history/9da607fd-8fdc-4f33-b7c9-e6cda00453bb.

2. Beatrice Heuser, *Brexit in History: Sovereignty or a European Union* (London: Hurst, 2019), 132–133.

3. See Tigran Yepremyan, ‘Napoleonic Paradigm of European Integration: Theory and History’, *Napoleonica: La Revue* 39, no. 1 (2021): 35–53, esp. 37.

4. See Ole Wæver, ‘Insecurity, Security, and Asecurity in the Western European Non-War Community’, in *Security Communities*, ed. Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 90.

5. Quoted in Marie-Therese Fay and Elizabeth Meehan, ‘British Decline and European Integration’, in *Rethinking British Decline*, ed. Richard English and Mike Kenny (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 211. See also, generally, Brendan Simms, *Britain’s Europe: A Thousand Years of Conflict and Cooperation* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

6. Alan S. Milward, *The European Rescue of the Nation State*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1999).

7. ‘Europe: America’s New Rival’, *Time*, March 12, 1973; David Brunnstrom, ‘EU Says It Has Solved the Kissinger Question’, Reuters, November 20, 2009.

8. Isaac Stanley-Becker, *Europe Without Borders: A History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2025). Duisenberg is quoted in David Marsh, *The Euro: The Politics of the New Global Currency* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 12.

9. Basil Germond, ‘The EU’s Security and the Sea: Defining a Maritime Security Strategy’, *European Security* 20, no. 4 (2011): 563–584.

10. ‘European Security Strategy: A Secure Europe in a Better World’, Council of the European Union, 2009, www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf.

11. See the discussion of EU statehood in Barry Buzan, *The United States and the Great Powers: World Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), 60, 71.

12. Quoted in C. E. de Vries, *Euroscepticism and the Future of European Integration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 56.

13. Brendan Simms and Benjamin Zeeb, *Europa am Abgrund: Plädoyer für die Vereinigten Staaten von Europa* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 2016).

14. Council of the European Union, Joint Statement on the Partnership for Modernisation, EU–Russia Summit, May 31–June 1, 2010, 10546/10 PRESSE 154, Rostov-on-Don, June 1, 2010.

15. Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013); Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Sanftes Monster Brüssel oder die Entmündigung Europas* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2012).

16. Nicola Casarini, *Remaking Global Order: The Evolution of Europe-China Relations and Its Implications for East Asia and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Douglas Webber, 'Declining Power Europe? The Evolution of the European Union's World Power in the Early 21st Century', *European Review of International Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016): 31–52, which looks at the ten years from 2004.

17. Ashoka Mody, *EuroTragedy: A Drama in Nine Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

18. Mario Draghi, 'Verbatim of the Remarks Made by Mario Draghi', European Central Bank, Global Investment Conference, London, July 26, 2012.

19. Quoted in C. Damro, 'Market Power Europe', *Journal of European Public Policy* 19, no. 5 (2012): 686.

20. Andrew Moravcsik, 'Europe: The Quiet Superpower', *French Politics* 7, no. 3 (2009): 403 et passim; Mark Leonard, *Why Europe Will Run the 21st Century* (London: Fourth Estate, 2005). The EU as a Great Power is discussed in Sven Biscop, *European Strategy in the 21st Century: New Future for Old Power* (London: Routledge, 2018), 37–66. Le Maire is quoted in 'Clear Differences Remain Between France and U.S., French Minister Says', *New York Times*, October 11, 2021.

21. See Anu Bradford, *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

22. Turkuler Isiksel, *Europe's Functional Constitution: A Theory of Constitutionalism Beyond the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 10 et passim; 'Strategic Compass of the European Union', Strategic Compass, March 21, 2022, www.strategic-compass-european-union.com/0_Introduction_Strategic_Compass.html; Chad Damro, 'Market Power Europe', 682–699.

23. European Union and Russian Federation, 'Joint Statement on the Partnership for Modernisation', EU-Russia Summit, May 31–June 1, 2010; EU Strategic Autonomy Monitor, EU Parliament, July 2022.

24. E.g., Ian Kearns, *Collapse: Europe After the European Union* (London: Biteback, 2018).

25. For an overview of the issues, see Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger, *Brexit and Beyond: Rethinking the Futures of Europe* (London: University College London, 2018), and Tim Oliver, ed., *Europe's Brexit: EU Perspectives on Britain's Vote to Leave* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda, 2018).

26. 'Critical Raw Materials', European Commission, accessed January 3, 2026, https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/raw-materials/areas-specific-interest/critical-raw-materials_en.

27. European External Action Service (EEAS), *Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe—A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy* (Brussels: European Union, June 2016).

28. EEAS, *Shared Vision, Common Action*, 15.

29. Stefaan De Rynck, *Inside the Deal: How the EU Got Brexit Done* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda, 2023).

30. Henry Kissinger, remarks to the Inaugural America and the Future of World Order Project Study Group Meeting, 2019. I thank Professor Frank Gavin and Dr Will Quinn for sharing the transcript with me.

31. 'Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific', European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, September 16, 2021, www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf, 12, 17.

32. Scholz is quoted in Stefan Auer, *European Disunion: Democracy, Sovereignty and the Politics of Emergency* (London: Hurst, 2022), 84.

33. See Sam Lowe, ‘EU-UK Relations: There Is No Steady State’, Centre for European Reform, October 26, 2021, www.cer.eu/insights/eu-uk-relations-there-no-steady-state.

34. Radek Sikorski, ‘Europe’s Real Test Is Yet to Come: Will the Continent Ever Get Serious About Its Own Security?’, *Foreign Affairs*, June 20, 2023.

35. Jill Treanor, ‘Lagarde’s Struggle to Save the Eurozone’, *Sunday Times* (London), June 19, 2022, 4; Sander Tordoir, Aslak Berg, Elisabetta Cornago, Zach Meyers, and Luigi Scazzieri, ‘Draghi’s Plan to Rescue the European Economy: Will EU Leaders Do Whatever It Takes?’, Centre for European Reform, September 17, 2024, www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2024/draghis-plan-rescue-european-economy.

36. Julia Rone, Nathalie Brack, Ramona Coman, and Amandine Crespy, eds., *Sovereignty in Conflict: Political, Constitutional and Economic Dilemmas in the EU* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023). See also Laurent Warlouzet, *Europe contre Europe: Entre liberté, solidarité et puissance* (Paris: CNRS, 2022).

37. See Zach Meyers, ‘In Tech, the Death of Brussels Effect Is Greatly Exaggerated’, Centre for European Reform, December 8, 2023, www.cer.eu/insights/tech-death-brussels-effect-greatly-exaggerated.

38. ‘Strategic Compass of the European Union’, 1, 19. The costs given at the end of the paragraph reflect the position at the end of 2024. I thank Janani Mohan for compiling these figures. ‘EU Solidarity with Ukraine’, European Council, accessed January 3, 2026, www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/eu-solidarity-ukraine.

39. Quotes in Christina Keßler, ‘A Sea of Trouble: Addressing the EU’s Incoherence on the Indo-Pacific’, Centre for European Reform, January 8, 2024, www.cer.eu/insights/sea-troubles-eus-indo-pacific.

40. Emmanuel Macron, ‘Europe Speech’, Élysée, April 24, 2024, www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2024/04/24/europe-speech.

41. See Ian Bond, Elisabetta Cornago, Zselyke Csaky, Zach Meyers, Luigi Scazzieri, and Sander Tordoir, ‘Can Europe Navigate Trump 2?’, Centre for European Reform, November 8, 2024, www.cer.eu/insights/can-europe-navigate-trump-2.

42. See summary at ‘Commission Unveils the White Paper for European Defence and the ReArm Europe Plan / Readiness 2030’, press release, European Commission, March 18, 2025, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_25_793. For Donald Tusk’s remarks, see ‘Historic Summit in London—Western Leaders Stand Together for Security and Ukraine’, Chancellery of the Prime Minister, Republic of Poland, March 2, 2025, www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/historic-summit-in-london--western-leaders-stand-together-for-security-and-ukraine.

43. Larisa Brown, ‘Europe Would Struggle to Put 25,000 Troops on the Ground in Ukraine’, *The Times* (London), April 29, 2025.

44. For fears that the EU might disintegrate, see Simms and Zeeb, *Europa am Abgrund*.

Chapter Ten: The Rise of the People's Republic of China

1. Timothy Brook, *Great State: China and the World* (London: Profile Books, 2019), 124–126.

2. Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005); William T. Rowe, *China's Last Empire: The Great Qing* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009). For the Zunghars, see Andrew Phillips, *How the East Was Won: Barbarian Conquerors, Universal Conquest and the Making of Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 203. See also Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World Since 1750* (London: Vintage, 2013), 9; 'Two Edicts from the Qianlong Emperor, on the Occasion of Lord Macartney's Mission to China, September 1793', in Asia for Educators, Columbia University, https://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/china/qianlong_edicts.pdf, 2.

3. For China's understanding of the wider world, see Ronald C. Po, 'Qing China and Its Offshore Islands in the Long Eighteenth Century', *Historical Journal* 67, no. 3 (2024): 430–462. For the tributary system, see John K. Fairbank, *The Chinese World Order: Traditional China's Foreign Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Matthew W. Mosca, *From Frontier Policy to Foreign Policy: The Question of India and the Transformation of Geopolitics in Qing China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); and Brantly Womack, 'Asymmetry and China's Tributary System', *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 5, no. 1 (2012): 37–54.

4. Quoted in Jonathan Fenby, *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850 to the Present* (London: Penguin, 2019), xxxi.

5. Rana Mitter, *Forgotten Ally: China's World War II, 1937 to 1945* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2013).

6. Mao is quoted in Peter Gries, 'Nationalism, Social Influences and Chinese Foreign Policy', in *China and the World*, ed. David Shambaugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 66.

7. Mao's remarks about imperialism are from Mao's speech to Chinese students, Moscow, November 17, 1957, online at 'The East Wind Prevails

over the West Wind', Maoist Documentation Project, www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-7/mswv7_480.htm.

8. For the impact of the Cultural Revolution, see Tania Branigan, *Red Memory* (London: Faber, 2024).

9. Zhou is quoted in Beverley Loke, 'Unpacking the Politics of Great Power Responsibility: Nationalist and Maoist China in International Order-Building', *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 4 (2016): 861; Joseph Fewsmith, *Forging Leninism in China: Mao and the Remaking of the Chinese Communist Party, 1927–1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

10. David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972–1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 254 et passim; Julian Gewirtz, *Never Turn Back: China and the Forbidden History of the 1980s* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2022).

11. For CCP anxieties at this time, see Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 52, 75.

12. Doshi, *Long Game*, 115.

13. Jiang is quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 54–55.

14. Deng is quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 59; Jiang is quoted in Zongyuan Liu, *Sovereign Funds: How the Communist Party of China Finances Its Global Ambitions* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2023), 57; and Zhu is quoted in Liu, *Sovereign Funds*, 56.

15. Bai is quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 126–127.

16. Loren Brandt and Thomas Rawski, eds., *China's Great Economic Transformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

17. For the lack of acceptance of China, see Shogo Suzuki, 'Journey to the West: China Debates Its "Great Power" Identity', *Millennium* 42, no. 3 (2014): 632–650, esp. 642.

18. For the lack of a 'balancing coalition' at this time, see David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 4, and Evelyn Goh, 'Great Powers and Hierarchical Order in South-East Asia. Analysing Regional Security Strategies', *International Security* 32, no. 3 (2007): 113–157.

19. Hu is quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 159–160.

20. Odd Arne Westad, ‘Legacies of the Past’, in Shambaugh, *China and the World*, 25; Wenlong Song, ‘“Seizing the Window of Strategic Opportunity”: A Study of China’s Macro-Strategic Narrative Since the 21st Century’, *Social Sciences* 11, no. 10 (2022): 461.

21. Xi, quoted in Steve Tsang and Olivia Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 174; Barak Kushner, *The Geography of Injustice: East Asia’s Battle Between Memory and History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2024), 223, 235, 241; Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

22. Deng is quoted in Chris Ogden, *China and India: Asia’s Emergent Great Powers* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 127; Xi is quoted in Tsang and Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, 187.

23. Ogden, *China and India*, 150; Doshi, *Long Game*, 128; Jean-Pierre Cabestan, ‘Introduction: China’s New Diplomacy: “Old Wine in New Bottles”’, in *A Handbook of China’s International Relations*, ed. Shaun Breslin (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

24. Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, ‘China’s “New Type of Great Power Relations”: A G2 with Chinese Characteristics?’, *International Affairs* 92, no. 4 (2016): 773–794. Wen is quoted in Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 239.

25. See Henry Kissinger, *On China* (London: Penguin, 2012), 498; Qing Cao, ‘Re-Imagined West in Chinese Television: A Case Study of the CCTV Documentary Series The Rise of the Great Powers’, in *Discourse and Social-Political Transformations in Contemporary China*, ed. Paul Chilton, Hailong Tian, and Ruth Wodak (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012), 127–144. I thank Bei Le Ng for kindly watching most of this series in Chinese and confirming this picture.

26. Yang, quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 175; Wang Yi, ‘Towards a New Model of Major-Country Relations Between China and the United States’, Brookings Institution, September 20, 2013, www.brookings.edu/events/toward-a-new-model-of-major-country-relations-between-china-and-the-united-states. Wang is also quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 178.

27. Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 10, 232. The conversations of academics in the PRC was described by T. V. Paul, in private conversation with the author, Cambridge, May 2024.

28. See Jianwei Wang, 'Xi Xinping's "Major Country Diplomacy": A Paradigm Shift?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 115 (2019): 17–20 (quotation, 17). More generally, see Zhao Tinyang, *All Under Heaven: The Tianxia System for a Possible World Order* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2021).

29. Quoted in Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 238.

30. Jin is quoted in Liu, *Sovereign Funds*, 203. On the PRC's continuing dependence on the West for certain forms of technology, see Nigel Inkster, *The Great Decoupling: China, America and the Struggle for Technological Supremacy* (London: Hurst, 2023), 83.

31. Xi's remarks are in 'Continuously Advance the Cause of Building a Strong Military', People's Daily Online, July 31, 2024, http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2024/0731/c1001-40289787.html. (I thank Bei Le Ng, of Emmanuel College Cambridge, for drawing this source to my attention and translating it.) See also Jeremy Page, 'New Beijing Leader's "China Dream"', *Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2013. On the importance of history to the 'China Dream', see Wang Gungwu, *China Reconnects: Joining a Deep-Rooted Past to a New World Order* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2019), 21, 31–32.

32. Andrew S. Erickson and Joel Wuthnow, 'Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks: China Conceptualises the Pacific "Island Chains"', *China Quarterly* 225 (2016): 1–22 (quotations, 11–12).

33. See Marc Lanteigne, 'China's Maritime Security and the "Malacca Dilemma"', *Asian Security* 4, no. 2 (2008): 143–161 (quotation, 143).

34. Xi is quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 209.

35. 'Document 9: A ChinaFile Translation', China File, November 8, 2013, www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation.

36. Chris Buckley, 'Behind Public Assurances, Xi Jinping Has Spread Grim Views on U.S.', *New York Times*, November 13, 2023. The Chinese diplomat is quoted in Gideon Rachman, *Easternisation: War and Peace in the Asian Century* (London: Bodley Head, 2016), 61. The Chinese ambassador to Sweden is quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 278. I thank Mariah

Zhong, a PhD student at Cambridge University, for drawing my attention to the origin of the ambassador's words.

37. Larry Diamond and Orville Schell, *China's Influence and American Interests: Promoting Constructive Vigilance* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2019). For a view of the PRC as a norm-compliant 'status quo' power in some areas, see Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter, *China, the United States and Global Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). For a bleaker view, see Malcolm Hugh Patterson, 'How China Abuses Pacts with International Agencies', *Quadrant* 66, no. 6 (2022): 17–19.

38. See Bethany Allen, *Beijing Rules: China's Quest for Global Influence* (London: John Murray, 2023), 195, 202–203.

39. The National Defense University study is quoted in Ian Easton, *The Final Struggle: Inside China's Global Strategy* (Manchester: Eastbridge, 2022), 118–191. For the intimidation of Australia, see Doshi, *Long Game*, 184.

40. Summers is quoted in Ogden, *China and India*, 141.

41. Ding is quoted in Liu, *Sovereign Funds*, 113.

42. Godfrey Yueng, '"Made in China 2025": The Development of a New Energy Vehicle Industry in China', *Area Development and Policy* 4, no. 1 (2018): 39–59; William Figueroa, 'Iran-Saudi Normalization: A Regional Process with Chinese Characteristics', Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 24, 2023, www.fpri.org/article/2023/03/iran-saudi-normalization-a-regional-process-with-chinese-characteristics.

43. Xi Jinping, 'Build a Bridge of Friendship and Cooperation Across the Eurasian Continent', April 1, 2014, in *The Governance of China* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014), 309–311. For the wider context, see Kerry Brown, *China's World: The Foreign Policy of the World's Newest Superpower* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 145–172.

44. Nicola Casarini, *Remaking Global Order: The Evolution of Europe-China Relations and Its Implications for East Asia and the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); 'Soros: China Saved the Euro', Business Insider, September 15, 2010, www.businessinsider.com/soros-china-saved-the-euro-2010-9; Mieczysław P. Boduszyński and Calla Li, 'External Autocratic Influence, the Balkans, and Democratic Decline', in

Geopolitical Turmoil in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean, ed. Hall Gardner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 89–118.

45. Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter, eds., *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation* (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018); David Shambaugh, 'China-Russia Relations: The New Axis', China-US Focus, July 26, 2019, www.chinausfocus.com/article/2019/0626/18482.html.

46. T. Xiao, ed., *The Science of Military Strategy* (战略学) (Beijing: Guofang daxue chubanshe, 2020). I thank Bei Le Ng for her translations. See also Matti Puranen and Sanna Kopra, 'China's Arctic Strategy—A Comprehensive Approach in Times of Great Power Rivalry', *Scandinavian Journal of Military Studies* 6, no. 1 (2023): 239–253 (quotation, 240).

47. Hu is quoted in Doshi, *Long Game*, 235.

48. See Liu, *Sovereign Funds*, 73; Doshi, *Long Game*, 241; Peter Frankopan, 'The Silk Roads Rise Again', *New Statesman*, October 22, 2015.

49. Yuan Wang, *The Railpolitik: Leadership and Agency in Sino-African Infrastructure Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023); Pal Nyiri, 'The Yellow Man's Burden: Chinese Migrants on a Civilising Mission', *China Journal* 56 (2006): 86–106.

50. See Zhengyu Wu, 'Towards Naval Normalcy: "Open Seas Protection" and Sino-US Maritime Relations', *Pacific Review* 32, no. 4 (2019): 667–668.

51. William J. Norris, *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy and State Control* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 63; David L. Shambaugh, *Where Great Powers Meet: America and China in Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 206–209, 243.

52. Kerry Brown, *The Taiwan Story: How a Small Island Will Dictate the Global Future* (London: Viking, 2024); Erickson and Wuthnow, 'Barriers, Springboards and Benchmarks', 13.

53. Tsang and Cheung, *The Political Thought of Xi Jinping*, 180.

54. Inkster, *The Great Decoupling*, 97–98.

55. 'Document No. 9'; Ian Johnson, *Sparks: China's Underground Historians and Their Battle for the Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

56. Dibyesh Anand, ‘Colonization with Chinese Characteristics: Politics of (in)Security in Xinjiang and Tibet’, *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 129–147.

57. Zheng Bijian, ‘China’s “Peaceful Rise” to Great Power Status’, *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (2005): 18–24 (quotation, 22); Ryan Martinez Mitchell, ‘Chinese Receptions of Carl Schmitt Since 1929’, *Penn State Journal of Law and International Affairs* 8, no. 1 (2020): 255. See, generally, Michael Salter, ‘Law, Power and International Politics with Special Reference to East Asia: Carl Schmitt’s *Grossraum* Analysis’, *Chinese Journal of International Law* 11, no. 3 (2012): 393–427; Brendan Simms, *Die Rückkehr des Grossraums* (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 2023), passim. Fang is quoted in Martinez Mitchell, ‘Chinese Receptions of Carl Schmitt’, 256.

58. ‘Xi’s Vision for a Responsible Country’, *China Daily*, Xinhua, December 22, 2017, www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201712/22/WS5a3cf743a31008cf16da2f74_3.html.

59. Zhengyu Wu, ‘Towards Naval Normalcy’, 675; Zhengyu Wu, ‘Grand Strategy and China’s Sea Power: A Review Essay’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 45, no. 1 (2021): 8; Zhengyu Wu, ‘Toward “Land” or Toward “Sea”?’, *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 3 (2013): 5, 12.

60. Manufacturing statistics are from Felix Richter, ‘China Is the World’s Manufacturing Superpower’, Statista, April 16, 2025, www.statista.com/chart/20858/top-10-countries-by-share-of-global-manufacturing-output.

61. Georges Haour and Max von Zedtwitz, *Created in China: How China Is Becoming a Global Innovator* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016); Graham Allison, ‘China’s Dominance of Solar Poses Difficult Choices for the West’, *Financial Times*, June 22, 2023.

62. See ‘Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2021’, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2022, www.sipri.org/publications/2022/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2021.

63. ‘How Severe Are China’s Demographic Challenges?’, China Power, Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 6, 2023, https://chinapower.csis.org/china-demographics-challenges.

64. Xiang is quoted in Frank Dikoetter, *China After Mao: The Rise of a Superpower* (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), xv. See also Amy Hawkins, 'China Spent $240bn on Belt and Road Bailouts from 2008 to 2021', *The Guardian*, March 28, 2023.

65. For TikTok, see Chris Stokel-Walker, *TikTok Boom: China's Dynamite App and the Superpower Race for Social Media* (Kingston upon Thames: Canbury Press, 2022), 214.

66. Xi is quoted in Joshua Kurlantzick, *Beijing's Global Media Offensive: China's Uneven Campaign to Influence Asia and the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 7. See also Joshua Kurlantzick, *Charm Offensive: How China's Soft Power Is Transforming the World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

67. Xu Liuliu, Li Qian, and Hu Yuwei, 'The Global Civilisation Initiative Full of Chinese Wisdom, Injects Fresh Momentum into Bright Shared Future', *Global Times*, April 17, 2023; Chih Yuan Woon and James D. Sidaway, 'Deglobalisation and China's Visions for Reconfiguring Development Space', *Geopolitics* 30, no. 2 (2024): 405–431.

68. Wu You, 'The Rise of China with Cultural Soft Power in the Age of Globalisation', *Journal of Literature and Art Studies* 8, no. 5 (May 2018): 763–778; Tim Summers, 'Limited Appeal: China's Soft Power in the United Kingdom', in *China's Soft Power in Europe: Falling on Hard Times*, ed. Ties Dams, Xiaoxue Martin, and Vera Kranenburg (European Think-Tank Network on China, 2021).

69. On popular views of Xi and the CCP, see Wenfang Tang, 'Democratic Authoritarianism: A Study of Chinese Political Orientations', in *China as Number One: The Emerging Values of a Rising Power*, ed. Yang Zhong and Ronald F. Inglehart (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2024), 34, 40, 46; Dams et al., *China's Soft Power in Europe*.

70. For regime fears of dissent, see Cai Xia, 'The Party That Failed: An Insider Breaks with Beijing', *Foreign Affairs*, December 4, 2020. The author was a professor at the Central Party School of the CCP from 1998 to 2012.

71. David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). The remarks of Li Keqiang are described in H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 126.

72. Elizabeth C. Economy, ‘China’s New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping’, *Foreign Affairs* 209, no. 15 (2018). Schwab and Costa are quoted in Luke Patey, *How China Loses: The Pushback Against Chinese Global Ambitions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2, 4.

73. Jacob Funk Kirkegaard, ‘China’s Population Decline Is Getting Close to Irreversible’, Peterson Institute for International Economics, January 18, 2024, www.piie.com/research/piie-charts/2024/chinas-population-decline-getting-close-irreversible; Vincent Ni, ‘The Rise of “Bai Lan”: Why China’s Frustrated Youth Are Ready to “Let It Rot”’, *The Guardian*, May 26, 2022.

74. Alicja Bachulska and Mark Leonard, ‘China and Ukraine: The Chinese Debate About Russia’s War and Its Meaning for the World’, ECFR Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, July 11, 2023, https://ecfr.eu/publication/china-and-ukraine-the-chinese-debate-about-russias-war-and-its-meaning-for-the-world.

75. Michael Beckley and Hal Brands, ‘The End of China’s Rise: Beijing Is Running Out of Time to Remake the World’, *Foreign Affairs*, October 1, 2021; M. Taylor Fravel, ‘The Myth of Chinese Diversionary War’, *Foreign Affairs*, September 15, 2023.

76. Doshi, *Long Game*, 164–165 (quotation, 2).

Chapter Eleven: The Survival of Russia

1. Putin is quoted in Mark N. Katz, 'Policy Watch: Is Russia Strong or Weak?', UPI, July 10, 2006, www.upi.com/Defense-News/2006/07/10/Policy-Watch-Is-Russia-strong-or-weak/39541152565695.

2. On the enduring importance of the 'Third Rome' concept, see Rodric Braithwaite, *Russia: Myths and Realities* (London: Profile Books, 2022), 6.

3. Peter the Great is quoted in Chris Miller, *We Shall Be Masters: Russian Pivots to East Asia from Peter the Great to Putin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), 5.

4. The Russian traveller is quoted in Miller, *We Shall Be Masters*, 56.

5. For the Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, see Anne Appelbaum, *Iron Curtain: The Crushing of Eastern Europe, 1945–1956* (New York: Doubleday, 2016). The importance of the Soviet Union's global role and its recognition by others, especially the United States, is a central theme in Sergei Radchenko's *To Run the World: The Kremlin's Cold War Bid for Global Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

6. M. E. Sarotte, *Not One Inch: America, Russia, and the Making of Post–Cold War Stalemate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 55 et passim.

7. Overheard courtroom conversation in Svetlana Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc* (London: Penguin, 2017), 278, 250.

8. Quoted in Andrei P. Tsygankov, 'Vladimir Putin's Vision of Russia as a Normal Great Power', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 21 (2005): 132.

9. See Richard Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest: The Post–Cold War Crisis of World Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 111.

10. Robertson's recollection of Putin is quoted in Michael Ashcroft and Isabel Oakeshott, *White Flag? An Examination of the UK's Defence Capability* (London: Biteback, 2018), 22.

11. Putin on NATO candidature is quoted in Peter Conradi, *Who Lost Russia? From the Collapse of the USSR to Putin's War on Ukraine* (London: Oneworld, 2022), 145.

12. Oliver Stone, *The Putin Interviews: Oliver Stone Interviews Vladimir Putin* (New York: Hot Books, 2017), 44.

13. Quoted in Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*, 112.

14. Quoted in Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (London: Granta, 2017), 240.

15. Maximilian Hess, *Economic War: Ukraine and the Global Conflict Between Russia and the West* (London: Hurst, 2023), 76; Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Threat to Russia and the West* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

16. Angela Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: US-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

17. Andrei Zagorski, 'Eastern Partnership from the Russian Perspective', *IPG Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 3 (2011).

18. 'Putin Deplores Collapse of USSR', BBC News, April 25, 2005, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/4480745.stm. It is sometimes translated as 'the major geopolitical disaster of the twentieth century'. Andrei P. Tsygankov, *The Strong State in Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

19. Vladimir Putin, 'Address and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy', February 10, 2007, The Kremlin, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034. Ivanov is quoted in 'Partnership with Russia in Europe: A Strategy for a Win-Win Situation?', 6th Roundtable Discussion, Morozovka, February 3–5, 2008, ed. Gesprächskreis Partnerschaft mit Russland in Europa, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, April 2008, https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/id/05446.pdf, 21. For the importance of history, and its manipulation by the regime, see Martin Sixsmith, with Daniel Sixsmith, *Putin and the Return of History: How the Kremlin Rekindled the Cold War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

20. Stone, *Putin Interviews*, 94–95.

21. Quoted in Gessen, *The Future Is History*, 389.

22. Support for Great Powerness among younger people is discussed in Ian Garner, *Z Generation: Into the Heart of Russia's Fascist Youth* (London: Hurst, 2023), 10 et passim; Nadezhda Arbatova, 'Three Faces of Russia's Neo-Eurasianism', *Survival* 61, no. 6 (2019): 7–24, 19.

23. Sergey Lavrov, Remarks to the Munich Security Conference, 2012; Stone, *Putin Interviews*, 30.

24. See Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*, 127; Stone, *Putin Interviews*, 168.

25. Surkov is quoted in Stefan Auer, *European Disunion: Democracy, Sovereignty and the Politics of Emergency* (London: Hurst, 2022), 101. Putin is quoted in Stone, *Putin Interviews*, 119, and in Jade McGlynn, *Russia's War* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 167.

26. See Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*, 126–127 (poll taken in mid-2016), 116.

27. Sergey Ivanov, speech to the Munich Security Conference, February 10, 2008, online at Acronym Institute, www.acronym.org.uk/old/archive/docs/0802/doc08.htm#ivanov; 'Russian National Security Strategy' (Presidential Edict No. 683 of December 31, 2015), Moscow, 2015, translation published by Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, Spanish Ministry of Defence (IEEE/ES), www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/OtrasPublicaciones/Internacional/2016/Russian-National-Security-Strategy-31Dec2015.pdf.

28. E.g., 'On the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation', Presidential Edict No. 683; Richard Sakwa, 'Sad Delusions: The Decline and Rise of Greater Europe', *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 12, no. 1 (2021): 5–18; Sergei Prozorov, *Understanding Conflict Between Russia and the EU: The Limits of Integration* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

29. Nemtsov, writing in the *Kyiv Post* on September 1, 2014, is quoted in Auer, *European Disunion*, 101; Dugin is quoted in Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 117.

30. Stone, *Putin Interviews*, 98; Mieczysław P. Boduszyński and Calla Li, 'External Autocratic Influence, the Balkans, and Democratic Decline', in *Geopolitical Turmoil in the Balkans and Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Hall Gardner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

31. Andrey Sushentsov and Nikita Neklyudov, 'The Caucasus in Russian Foreign Policy Strategy', *Caucasus Survey* 8, no. 2 (2020): 127–141.

32. Stephen Blank, 'Is Russia a Great Power in Asia?', in *Great Powers and Geopolitics: International Affairs in a Rebalancing World*, ed. Aharon Klieman (Cham: Springer, 2015); Dmitri Trenin, 'Challenges and Opportunities: Russia and the Rise of China and India', in *Asia Responds to Its Rising Powers: China and India*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis, Travis Tanner, and Jessica Keough (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2012), 234.

33. Stone, *Putin Interviews*, 89. The Russian ambassador is quoted in Trenin, ‘Challenges and Opportunities’, 243.

34. See Samuel Charap, John Drennan, and Pierre Noël, ‘Russia and China: A New Model of Great Power Relations’, *Survival* 59, no. 1 (2017): 25–42; Andrey Kortunov, ‘Will Russia Return to Europe?’, Russian International Affairs Council, November 6, 2018, https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/analytics/will-russia-return-to-europe.

35. ‘Transcript of Speech by Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov at the 46th Munich Security Conference, February 6, 2010’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation, February 8, 2010, www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/1604779; ‘Speech by the Russian Foreign Minister, Sergey Lavrov, at the 50th Munich Security Conference, Munich, 1 February 2014’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation, February 1, 2014, www.mid.ru/es/foreign_policy/news/1629454/?lang=en.

36. Vladimir Putin, ‘A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making’, *Izvestia*, October 4, 2011, Russian Archives, http://archive.government.ru/eng/docs/16622/print.

37. Putin, ‘A New Integration Project for Eurasia’.

38. For the Russian invasion of Eastern Ukraine, see Jakob Hauter, *Russia’s Overlooked Invasion: The Causes of the 2014 Outbreak of War in Ukraine’s Donbas* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2023).

39. The connection between Syria and the Caucasus in Moscow’s mind is described in Sushentsov and Neklyudov, ‘The Caucasus in Russian Foreign Policy Strategy’, 136; Derek Averre and Lance Davies, ‘Russia, Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: The Case of Syria’, *International Affairs* 91, no. 4 (2015): 813–834; Nikolay A. Kozhanov, *Russia and the Syrian Conflict: Moscow’s Domestic, Regional and Strategic Interests* (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2016).

40. ‘Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club’, Kremlin, September 19, 2013, http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19243.

41. Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right: Tango Noir* (London: Routledge, 2017).

42. Lavrov is quoted in Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*, 183. See also Viatcheslav Morozov, *Russia’s Postcolonial Identity: A Subaltern Empire in*

a Eurocentric World (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

43. Russian military doctrine is quoted in Keir Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West?* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 120–121.

44. See Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, 'The Myth of Russian Decline: Why Moscow Will Be a Persistent Power', *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 6 (2021): 142–152.

45. Quoted in Sakwa, *Russia Against the Rest*, 261.

46. See McGlynn, *Russia's War*, 27.

47. Quoted in Per Ekman, 'Painful Moments and Realignment: Explaining Ukraine's Foreign Policy, 2014–2022', *Problems of Post-Communism* 71, no. 3 (2024): 232–244, 237.

48. Laurie Bristow, 'Putin's War Without End', *Prospect Magazine*, February 14, 2025.

49. Chris Bellamy, Dustin du Cane, and Philip W. Blood, *Russian Genocidal Warfare: A Strategy of Annihilation* (London: Hurst, 2023). Lavrov is quoted in McGlynn, *Russia's War*, 143.

50. E.g., Hugh Tomlinson, 'Putin Is Heading for "Economic Oblivion"', *The Times* (London), August 4, 2022; Jane Flanagan and Marc Bennetts, 'African Leaders Reject Kremlin Summit', *The Times* (London), July 27, 2023; Janko Šćepanović, 'Still a Great Power? Russia's Status Dilemmas Post–Ukraine War', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 31, no. 1 (2024): 80–95.

51. Nikolai Patrushev, interview with Argumenti i Fakti, January 9, 2023, as reported by Middle East Media Research Institute, January 16, 2023, www.memri.org/reports/russian-national-security-council-secretary-patrushev-all-four-assassinations-american.

52. Kiriyenko, quoted in McGlynn, *Russia's War*, 100–101; interview with Sergey Karaganov by Bruno Maçães, *New Statesman*, April 8–21, 2022, 28; Vladimir Putin, speech, September 29, 2022, in 'Full Text of Putin's Speech at Annexation Ceremony', Mirage, October 1, 2022, www.miragenews.com/full-text-of-putins-speech-at-annexation-866383.

53. Putin speech, September 29, 2022; Bezrukov, quoted in McGlynn, *Russia's War*, 168.

54. The centrality of the 'Anglo-Saxons' to Moscow's world view is described in McGlynn, *Russia's War*, 126–133, 205; Putin speech,

September 29, 2022; ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Remarks at the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security, Moscow, August 15, 2023’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Russian Federation, August 15, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1900527; Patrushev interview, January 9, 2023.

55. Putin speech, September 29, 2022; Shoigu, quoted in Friedrich Schmidt, ‘Gäste und Panzer als Trophäen’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 17, 2023; Sergey Lavrov, remarks at the 11th Moscow Conference on International Security.

56. ‘Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s Article for South Africa’s Ubuntu Magazine’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, August 21, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1901054; Alexander Dugin, ‘Eschatologies of the Multipolar World’, Geopolitika.ru, August 29, 2023, www.geopolitika.ru/en/article/eschatologies-multipolar-world.

57. Alexander Hill, ‘Why Russia Still Has Friends on the World Stage’, The Conversation, July 3, 2024, https://theconversation.com/why-russia-still-has-friends-on-the-world-stage-233417.

58. Robert Dalsjö, Michael Jonson, and Johan Norberg, ‘A Brutal Examination: Russian Military Capability in Light of the Ukraine War’, *Survival* 64, no. 3 (2022): 7–28.

59. For a sceptical view of Russia’s Great Power status, see Phillips O’Brien, ‘There’s No Such Thing as a Great Power: How a Dated Concept Distorts Geopolitics’, *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2023.

60. Maria Kiseleva and Victoria Safronova, ‘Why Are People Leaving Russia, Who Are They and Where Are They Going?’, BBC News, June 3, 2023, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65790759; Nicholas Eberstadt, ‘The Dying Bear: Russia’s Demographic Disaster’, *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 6 (2011): 95–108.

61. ‘The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation’, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586.

62. Quoted in Agnia Grigas, *Beyond Crimea: The New Russian Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 25.

63. E.g., the Soft Power 30 (https://softpower30.com) and Global Soft Power (https://brandirectory.com/softpower) indexes; Peter Rutland and

Andrei Kazantsev, ‘The Limits of Russia’s “Soft Power”’, *Journal of Political Power* 9, no. 3 (2016): 395–413.

64. ‘Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club’.

65. Quoted in Mark B. Smith, *The Russia Anxiety: And How History Can Resolve It* (London: Penguin, 2020), 1.

Chapter Twelve: The Persistence of the United Kingdom

1. Rudyard Kipling, ‘Recessional’, 1897, online at Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46780/recessional.

2. Adams is quoted in Brendan Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat: The Rise and Fall of the First British Empire, 1714–1783* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), 387.

3. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London: Allen Lane, in association with the National Maritime Museum, 2004).

4. For the divisions between Whigs and Tories over foreign policy, see Simms, *Three Victories and a Defeat*.

5. John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State, 1688–1783* (London: Routledge, 1989).

6. See the trilogy by N. A. M. Rodger: *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain, 660–1649* (London: Allen Lane, 1997); *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2004); and *The Price of Victory: A Naval History of Britain, 1814–1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2024).

7. See John Darwin, *Britain and Decolonisation: The Retreat from Empire in the Post-War World* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

8. David Sanders and David Patrick Houghton, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role: British Foreign Policy Since 1945* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 2; ‘Threat to British Sovereignty: Mr Gaitskell on EEC’, *The Guardian*, October 16, 1962, 2. I thank Hugh Simms for this reference.

9. Richard English and Mike Kenny, eds., *Rethinking British Decline* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); David Reynolds, *Britannia Overruled: British Policy and World Power in the Twentieth Century* (London: Longman, 1991).

10. For nuclear matters, see John Baylis, ‘British Nuclear Doctrine: The “Moscow Criterion” and the Polaris Improvement Programme’, *Contemporary British History* 19, no. 1 (2005): 53–65. On the reputation of British intelligence, see Calder Walton, *Spies: The Epic Intelligence War Between East and West* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2023), 5, and Andrei Soldatov, ‘John Le Carré and Spying as seen by the KGB’, in

Tradecraft: Writers on John le Carre, ed. Federico Varese (Oxford: Bodleian Library Publishing, 2025), 87–88.

11. For Polaris, see Peter Hennessey and James Jinks, *The Silent Deep: The Royal Navy Submarine Service Since 1945* (London: Allen Lane, 2015), 200–269.

12. Kori Schake, *Safe Passage: The Transition from British to American Hegemony* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Henry Kissinger, 'Reflections on a Partnership: British and American Attitudes to Postwar Foreign Policy', *International Affairs* 58, no. 4 (1982): 571–587. See also Robert Henderson and Steve Marsh, eds., *Culture Matters: Anglo-American Relations and the Intangibles of 'Specialness'* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).

13. Brendan Simms, *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia* (London: Allen Lane, 2001).

14. Theo Farrell, *Unwinnable: Britain's War in Afghanistan, 2001–2014* (London: Vintage, 2017).

15. The shifts on the PRC are discussed in Kerry Brown, *The Great Reversal: Britain, China and the 400-Year Contest for Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024), 306–327.

16. William Wallace, 'Foreign Policy and National Identity in the United Kingdom', *International Affairs* 67, no. 1 (1991): 65–80.

17. Franks is quoted in Srdjan Vucetic, *Greatness and Decline: National Identity and British Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021), 21, and Howard is quoted in Tom McTague, *Between the Waves: The Hidden History of a Very British Revolution, 1945–2016* (London: Picador Press, 2025), 345.

18. 'Sir John Major's Speech—Middle Temple's Treasurer's Lecture: The State We're In', November 9, 2020, The Rt. Hon. Sir John Major KG CH, https://johnmajorarchive.org.uk/2020/11/09/sir-john-majors-speech-middle-temples-treasurers-lecture-the-state-were-in.

19. David Reynolds, 'The End of the Brexit Delusions', *New Statesman*, January 26–February 1, 2024, 27; Peter Ricketts, *Hard Choices: What Britain Does Next* (London: Atlantic Books, 2021), 9–10; Tom Fletcher, Moazzam Malik, and Lord Sedwill, 'The World in 2040: Renewing the UK's Approach to International Affairs', UCL Policy Lab, University College London, April 8, 2024, www.ucl.ac.uk/policy-

lab/sites/policy_lab/files/the_world_in_2040-_renewing_the_uks_approach_to_international_affairs.pdf; Christopher Hill, *The Future of British Foreign Policy: Security and Diplomacy in a World After Brexit* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 21, 71, 97, 170; Angus Hanton, *Vassal State: How America Runs Britain* (London: Swift Press, 2024).

20. See Justin Morris, 'How Great Is Britain? Power, Responsibility and Britain's Future Global Role', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 13, no. 3 (2011): 326–347 (quotations, 336); Sanders and Houghton, *Losing an Empire, Finding a Role*, 3.

21. Tony Blair, 'The Blair Doctrine', speech before the Chicago Economic Club, April 22, 1999, at Global Policy Forum, https://archive.globalpolicy.org/empire/humanint/1999/0422blair.htm.

22. See William D. James, *British Grand Strategy in the Age of American Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 202 et passim.

23. Tony Blair, 'Tony Blair's Mansion House Speech: Full Text', *The Guardian*, November 15, 2005, www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/nov/15/development.internationalaiddanddevelopment1.

24. E.g., *Security and Stabilisation: The Military Contribution*, Joint Doctrine Publication 3-50 (Shrivenham: UK Ministry of Defence, Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2009), xiii et passim; Farrell, *Unwinnable*, 422.

25. Theresa May, 'HMS *Queen Elizabeth*, Portsmouth: Theresa May's Speech', August 16, 2017, Government of the United Kingdom, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hms-queen-elizabeth-portsmouth-theresa-mays-speech; 'Appendix: Memorandum from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office', in 'Global Britain', House of Commons, Foreign Affairs Committee, March 12, 2018, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/780/78008.htm#_idTextAnchor035; 'PM Address to the Nation: 31 January 2020. Prime Minister Boris Johnson Addressed the Nation', Government of the United Kingdom, January 31, 2020, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-address-to-the-nation-31-january-2020. See also David Blagden, 'Two

Visions of Greatness: Roleplay and Realpolitik in UK Strategic Posture', *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15, no. 4 (2019): 470–491.

26. 'Robin Cook's Speech on the Government's Ethical Foreign Policy', *The Guardian*, May 12, 1997, www.theguardian.com/world/1997/may/12/indonesia.ethicalforeignpolicy.

27. See the blistering critique in Arthur Snell, *How Britain Broke the World: War, Greed and Blunders from Kosovo to Afghanistan, 1997–2021* (Kingston upon Thames: Canbury Press, 2022).

28. 'HM Treasury Analysis: The Immediate Economic Impact of Leaving the EU', Government of the United Kingdom, May 2016, www.gov.uk/government/publications/hm-treasury-analysis-the-immediate-economic-impact-of-leaving-the-eu. See also John van Reenen, 'Brexit's Long-Run Effects on the UK Economy', *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 2016, no. 2 (2016): 367–383.

29. Tom Fletcher, *The Naked Diplomat: Understanding Power and Politics in the Digital Age* (London: William Collins, 2017), xi.

30. Brendan Simms, 'From Backdoor to Backstop: Ireland's Shifting Relationship with Britain and Europe', *New Statesman*, September 18, 2019.

31. Andrew Dorman, 'More Than a Storm in a Teacup: The Defence and Security Implications of Scottish Independence', *International Affairs* 90, no. 3 (2014): 679–696. The GDP figures are from 2022, and I am grateful to Mr George Herring for compiling them from the following sources: 'Regional Gross Domestic Product and Gross Value Added: 1998 to 2019', Welsh Government, May 26, 2021, www.gov.wales/regional-gross-domestic-product-and-gross-value-added-1998-2021; 'Gross Domestic Product (GDP) Quarterly National Accounts: 2020 Quarter 2', Scottish Government, October 28, 2020, www.gov.scot/publications/gdp-quarterly-national-accounts-2020-q2; 'Gross Domestic Product of Northern Ireland from 1998 to 2023', Statista, 2025, www.statista.com/statistics/384096/gdp-of-northern-ireland/?srsltid=AfmBOoplZpUj4V6Fpsb-NLH9-RQIfVG0ruNpx_G-nrwKsEDkwlB5UTW_; 'Regional Economic Activity by Gross Domestic Product, UK: 1998 to 2020', Office for National Statistics, United Kingdom, May 30, 2022, www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossdomesticproductgdp/bulletins/regionaleconomicactivitybygrossdomesticproductuk/1998to2022.

32. Rob Thornton and Marina Miron, ‘Deterring Russian Cyber Warfare: The Practical Legal and Ethical Constraints Faced by the United Kingdom’, *Journal of Cyber Policy* 4, no. 2 (2019): 257–274; Sascha-Dominik Dov Bachmann and Anthony Papithi, ‘Russia’s Hybrid War and Its Implications for Defence and Security in the United Kingdom’, *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies* 44, no. 2 (2016): 28–67. Russian interference in the Brexit referendum is discussed in Rachel Ellehuus, ‘Mind the Gaps: Russian Information Manipulation in the United Kingdom’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 31, 2020, www.csis.org/analysis/mind-gaps-russian-information-manipulation-united-kingdom.

33. E.g., ‘An Overlooked Risk. Evenstar Research: China’s Indirect Influence on the UK’s National Security Supply Chain’, *What China Wants* (podcast), December 7, 2022, https://samolsen.substack.com/p/episode-29-an-overlooked-risk; The Integrated Review 2021, United Kingdom, Cabinet Office, March 16, 2021, www.gov.uk/government/collections/the-integrated-review-2021, 6, 20.

34. Brendan Simms and James Rogers, ‘The Baltic Geopolitics Challenges for Today’, in *Understanding the Baltic States: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania Since 1991*, ed. Charles Clarke (London: Hurst, 2023), 259–272; Duncan Depledge, *Britain and the Arctic* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 63–99.

35. Richard G. Whitman, ‘The UK’s European Diplomatic Strategy for Brexit and Beyond’, *International Affairs* 95, no. 2 (2019): 383–404. See also the speech by Boris Johnson, ‘Beyond Brexit. A Global Britain’, December 2, 2016, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/beyond-brexit-a-global-britain.

36. Quoted in Hill, *The Future of British Foreign Policy*, 108.

37. Boris Johnson, *Unleashed* (London: HarperCollins, 2024), 536–537.

38. See John Springford, ‘Brexit, Four Years On: Answers to Two Trade Paradoxes’, Centre for European Reform, January 25, 2024, www.cer.eu/insights/brexit-four-years-answers-two-trade-paradoxes.

39. See Tomas Jermalavičius and Alice Billon-Galland, ‘British Power in Baltic Weather: The UK’s Role in Nordic-Baltic Security and UK-Estonia Defence Cooperation’, International Centre for Defence and

Security, July 7, 2023, https://icds.ee/en/british-power-in-baltic-weather-the-uks-role-in-nordic-baltic-security-and-uk-estonia-defence-cooperation.

40. Liz Truss, ‘The Era of Complacency Is Over: Atlantic Council Makins Lecture 2002’, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC, March 10, 2022, archived at Government of the United Kingdom, www.gov.uk/government/speeches/foreign-secretary-liz-truss-speech-at-the-atlantic-council-annual-makins-lecture.

41. Toby Helm, ‘Labour Wants New EU Links in a Reset of British Foreign Policy’, *The Observer*, September 16, 2023, 1.

42. Peter Watkins, ‘Brief: British Nuclear Policy’, International Centre for Defence and Security, May 2023, https://icds.ee/wp-content/uploads/dlm_uploads/2023/06/ICDS_Brief_British_Nuclear_Policy_Peter_Watkins_May_2023.pdf.

43. See the brutal accounting in David Richards and Julian Lindley-French, *The Retreat from Strategy: Britain’s Dangerous Confusion of Interests with Values* (London: Hurst, 2024).

44. Ben Martin, ‘Britain Leads Europe for Start-up Cash’, *The Times* (London), October 24, 2024, 31; Mehreen Khan, ‘IMF Slashes Forecast for UK Growth’, *The Times* (London), October 11, 2023.

45. Hill, *The Future of British Foreign Policy*, 105.

46. The Kremlin statement is quoted in Simms and Rogers, ‘The Baltic Geopolitics’, 267. Russian threats against Britain are discussed in Neil Barnett and Helena Ivanov, ‘Russia’s Hybrid War Against the UK: Time to Fight Back Against the Kremlin’, Henry Jackson Society, June 14, 2022, https://henryjacksonsociety.org/publications/russias-hybrid-war-against-the-uk. *The Global Times* is quoted in Philippe Le Corre, ‘Sino-EU Relations, a Post-Brexit Jump into the Unknown?’, Brookings Institution, July 11, 2016, www.brookings.edu/articles/sino-eu-relations-a-post-brexit-jump-into-the-unknown. The other quotations are from ‘UK Conflates Global Britain with Colonial Britain’, *China Daily*, July 27, 2021, www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202107/27/WS60ffec22a310efa1bd664c83.html; Biao Zhang and Ruike Xu, ‘Chinese Views of “Global Britain”: Evidence from the Government, Media, and Scholars’, *Asia Europe Journal* 23 (2025): 110–111. See also Catherine Jones, ‘Assurance and Deterrence in the UK’s East Asia Policies: (In)credible UK?’, *RUSI Journal* 167, no. 6–7 (2022): 54–63, 57.

47. See Anna Wieslander and Viktor Lundquist, ‘The UK, France, and the United States in Sweden’s Vicinity: Strategic Interests and Military Activities’, Atlantic Council, 2021, www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-UK-France-and-the-United-States-in-Swedens-vicinity.pdf; Patrick Wintour, ‘UK Goes Further Than Any Other NATO Country in Sweden and Finland Pledge’, *The Guardian*, May 11, 2022.

48. ‘Address by H. E. Mr. Nishimura Yasutoshi, Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, to the International Institute for Strategic Studies’, International Institute for Strategic Studies, September 6, 2023, www.iiss.org/events/2023/09/a-dialogue-with-minister-nishimura-yasutoshi-a-new-japan-uk-alliance-for-evolution; Michito Tsukuroka, ‘Britannia Tests the Waves: What CSG21 Means for Japan and the Region’, Nippon, November 19, 2021, www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00767; Philip Shetler-Jones, ‘UK-Japan Relations and the Indo-Pacific Tilt: The Cornerstone’, *RUSI Journal* 167, no. 6/7 (2022): 44–52, 48–49.

49. *The State of Southeast Asia: 2024 Survey Report*, ISEAS, Yusof Ishak Institute, April 2024, www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre/state-of-southeast-asia-survey/the-state-of-southeast-asia-2024-survey-report, 38.

50. See *Global Perceptions 2023: How 18–34 Year Olds See the UK and the World*, British Council, December 2023, www.britishcouncil.org/research-insight/global-perceptions-2023, 19–23 et passim.

51. See the research by the Afghanistan veteran Adam Shindler in ‘Warfare Under Scrutiny: British Public Perspectives of Soldiers, and Tactical Behaviours in Operation HERRICK’, *Defense and Security Analysis* 39, no. 4 (2023): 411–431, and ‘The Specter of the Casualty: Elite Misreading of British Public Perceptions of the Soldier, 2001–2014’, *Armed Forces and Society* (2024): 1–24.

Chapter Thirteen: The Continued Dominance of the United States

1. For patriot views of the European Great Power system, see D. H. Robinson, *The Idea of Europe and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

2. Winthrop S. Hudson, 'This Most Favored Nation: Reflections on the Vocation of America', *Journal of Church and State* 19, no. 2 (1977): 217–230 (quotation, 220); Walter McDougall, *A Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997); Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001); Godfrey Hodgson, *The Myth of American Exceptionalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996); Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

3. Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

4. See John Thompson, *A Sense of Power: The Roots of America's Global Role* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), and Andrews Preston, *Total Defense: The New Deal and the Invention of National Security* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2025).

5. G. W. Price, 'Pacific Now Anglo-Saxon Lake', *The Advocate*, March 3, 1949, 1.

6. Geir Lundestad, '"Empire by Invitation" in the American Century', *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 2 (1999): 189–217. President Johnson is quoted in H. W. Brands, 'Johnson and de Gaulle: American Diplomacy Sotto Voce', *The Historian* 49, no. 4 (1987): 478–493, 489.

7. George Bush, 'Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union', January 29, 1991, at American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-1. The moment of uncontested US supremacy was actually relatively brief. See Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar*

Moment: US Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post–Cold War Order (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016).

8. Zalmay Khalilzad, '4 Lessons About America's Role in the World', *The National Interest*, March 23, 2016.

9. 'Full Text of Clinton's Speech on China Trade Bill', Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University, March 8, 2000, at *New York Times*, March 9, 2000, https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/library/world/asia/030900clinton-china-text.html. For the economic 'bargain', see Elizabeth O'Brien Ingleson, *Made in China: When US-China Interests Converged to Transform Global Trade* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024).

10. Tony Smith, *America's Mission: The United States and the Worldwide Struggle for Democracy in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

11. William J. Clinton, preface to National Security Strategy 2001: A National Security Strategy for a Global Age, White House, December 2000, at National Security Strategy Archive, https://nssarchive.us/national-security-strategy-2000.

12. U.S. National Security Strategy: Transform America's National Security Institutions to Meet the Challenges and Opportunities of the 21st Century, Joint Session of Congress, September 20, 2001, at US Department of State Archive, https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ei/wh/15430.htm.

13. 'President Bush's Second Inaugural Address', at NPR, January 20, 2005, www.npr.org/2005/01/20/4460172/president-bushs-second-inaugural-address; Andrew Glass, 'President Bush Cites "Axis of Evil"', January 29, 2002, Politico, January 29, 2019, www.politico.com/story/2019/01/29/bush-axis-of-evil-2002-1127725.

14. For a realist critique, see Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America's Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of US Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018). In the interests of full disclosure, the author would like to note that at the time he supported the invasion of Iraq and removal of Saddam Hussein.

15. Robert A. Pape, 'Soft Balancing Against the United States', *International Security* 30, no. 1 (2005): 7–45; Clyde Prestowitz, *Rogue*

Nation: American Unilateralism and the Failure of Good Intentions (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

16. See Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, *Lost Decade: The US Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

17. 'Remarks by the President on Election Night', November 7, 2012, White House, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/11/07/remarks-president-election-night; National Security Strategy 2015, White House, February 2015, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf.

18. National Security Strategy 2010, White House, May 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf, 1, 4, 8, 11, 17; National Security Strategy 2015, 4.

19. Elbridge A. Colby and A. Wess Mitchell, 'The Age of Great-Power Competition: How the Trump Administration Refashioned American Strategy', *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 1 (2020): 118–130; 'Remarks by Secretary Mattis on the National Defense Strategy', January 19, 2018, at US Department of War, www.war.gov/News/Tran-scripts/Transcript-View/Article/1420042/remarks-by-secretary-mattis-on-the-national-defense-strategy; National Security Strategy 2017, White House, December 2017, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf, 25.

20. National Security Strategy 2017, 27, 55.

21. National Security Strategy 2017, 25; *The Elements of the China Challenge*, Office of Policy Planning, US Department of State, November 2020, www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/20-02832-Elements-of-China-Challenge-508.pdf. See also Hal Brands, ed., *Lessons from the New Cold War: America Confronts the China Challenge* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2025), 1.

22. *The Elements of the China Challenge*, 9, 29.

23. H. R. McMaster, *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World* (New York: Harper Collins, 2020), 10, 17.

24. National Security Strategy, White House, October 2022, https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf, 6, 8; Jake

Sullivan, ‘The Sources of American Power: A Foreign Policy for a Changed World’, *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 6 (2023), www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/sources-american-power-biden-jake-sullivan.

25. National Security Strategy 2017, 2.

26. Obama’s remarks on history are quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic*, April 2016.

27. National Security Strategy 2022, 10.

28. E.g., Nick Bryant, *When America Stopped Being Great: A History of the Present* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021); Lawrence Summers, ‘Summers Warns US Is Getting “Lonely” as Other Powers Band Together’, *Bloomberg*, April 14, 2023, www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-04-14/summers-warns-us-getting-lonely-as-other-powers-band-together.

29. Peter Spiegel and Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson, ‘US Navy Secretary Warns of “Fragile” Supply Chain’, *Financial Times*, November 5, 2019.

30. National Security Strategy 2022, 37, 23.

31. National Security Strategy 2022, 23.

32. On Paulson, see Kishore Mahbubani, *Has China Won? The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2020), 37.

33. Fiona Hill is quoted in McMaster, *Battlegrounds*, 93. See also Robert C. Lieberman, Suzanne Mettler, and Kenneth M. Roberts, eds., *Democratic Resilience: Can the United States Withstand Rising Polarisation?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), esp. 3–34.

34. Colby and Mitchell, ‘The Age of Great-Power Competition’, 123.

35. See the discussion in George Packer, ‘A New Theory of American Power: The United States Can—and Must—Wield Its Power for Good’, *The Atlantic*, November 21, 2022; Andrew Bacevich, *After the Apocalypse: America’s Role in the World Transformed* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021); and Samuel Moyn, *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

36. A. Wess Mitchell and Jakub Grygiel, ‘US Strategy Should Be Europe First, Then Asia’, *Foreign Policy*, September 6, 2024; Josh Rogin, *Chaos Under Heaven: Trump, Xi and the Battle for the 21st Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), 22, 29.

37. For some of the wider intellectual framing, see Matthew Kroenig and Dan Negrea, *We Win, They Lose: Republican Foreign Policy and the*

New Cold War, with a foreword by Mike Pompeo (New York: Republic, 2024), esp. 180–183.

38. Xiao Liang, Nan Tian, Diego Lopes da Silva, Lorenzo Scarazzato, Zubaida A. Karim, and Jade Guiberteau Ricard, ‘Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2024’, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2025, www.sipri.org/publications/2025/sipri-fact-sheets/trends-world-military-expenditure-2024.

39. Jonathan Stevenson, *Overseas Bases and US Strategy: Optimising America’s Military Footprint* (London: Routledge, 2022); Michael A. Allen, Michael E. Flynn, and Carla Martinez Machain, ‘US Global Military Deployments, 1950–2020’, *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 39, no. 3 (2022): 351–370. The complete dominance of the United States in international basing is stressed by Sebastian Schmidt, *Armed Guests: Territorial Sovereignty and Foreign Military Basing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 217 et passim. See also Yuen Foong Khong, ‘The American Tributary System’, *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 6, no. 1 (2013): 1–47; Alexander Cooley, *Base Politics: Democratic Change and the US Military Overseas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). For a particularly critical view, see David Vine, *Base Nation: How US Military Bases Abroad Harm America and the World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2015); Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A Short History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019); Lundestad, ‘“Empire by Invitation”’.

40. Barry Posen, ‘Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony’, *International Security* 28, no. 1 (2003): 5–46; Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman, *Underground Empire: How America Weaponised the World Economy* (London: Allen Lane, 2023); Edward Fishman, *Chokepoints: How the Global Economy Became a Weapon of War* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2025).

41. Eswar S. Prasad, *The Dollar Trap: How the US Dollar Tightened Its Grip on Global Finance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014).

42. Frank P. Harvey and John Mitton, *Fighting for Credibility: US Reputation and International Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

43. Bryant, *When America Stopped Being Great*. On the impact of the second Trump administration, see ‘America’s Reputation Drops Across the

World’, Ipsos, April 17, 2025, www.ipsos.com/en-us/americas-reputation-drops-across-the-world.

44. Hal Brands, ‘Rethinking America’s Grand Strategy: Insights from the Cold War’, *US Army College Quarterly: Parameters* 45, no. 4 (2015): 15; Daniel Fried, ‘American Disaster, American Resilience’, *New Atlanticist*, April 3, 2020. Sato is quoted in Samuel Huntington, ‘The US: Decline or Renewal?’, *Foreign Affairs* 67, no. 2 (1988): 93. See also Ganesh Sitaraman, ‘A Grand Strategy of Resilience: American Power in the Age of Fragility’, *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 5 (2020): 165–174.

Chapter Fourteen: The Global Futures of the Great Powers

1. Jake Sullivan, 'The Sources of American Power: A Foreign Policy for a Changed World', *Foreign Affairs* 102, no. 6 (2023). For a sophisticated discussion of the likelihood of the unexpected, see also Jonathan Kirschner, *An Unwritten Future: Realism and Uncertainty in World Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

2. Masha Gessen, *The Future Is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017).

3. Rana Mitter, 'The World China Wants', *Foreign Affairs*, December 8, 2020, 100, 164–165. The term '1939 Project' was coined by one of its strongest critics: Rebeccah L. Heinrichs, 'The Right's 1939 Project', Hudson Institute, July 15, 2025, www.hudson.org/politics-government/rights-1939-project-rebeccah-heinrichs.

4. Azeem Ibrahim, *Authoritarian Century: Omens of a Post-Liberal Future* (London: Hurst, 2022).

5. Henry Kissinger, Eric Schmidt, and Daniel Huttenlocher, *The Age of AI* (London: John Murray, 2021), 221–226 et passim; Paul Scharre, *Four Battlegrounds: Power in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (New York: Norton, 2023), 4. An optimistic view is provided by Kai-Fu Lee, *AI Superpowers: China, Silicon Valley and the New World Order* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018).

6. 'China Uses Forced Uyghur Labour to Make Solar Panels, Says Report', BBC News, May 14, 2021, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-57124636; Adam Tooze, 'Chartbook 284: The Beginning of a New Era', *Chartbook* (Substack), May 19, 2024, https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-284-the-beginning-of-a.

7. See Ofir Zigelman, 'Artificial Intelligence, World Order, and Statecraft: Historic Lessons and Strategic Implications', unpublished paper, 2025. My understanding of this issue has greatly benefitted from discussion with Zigelman and I thank him for sharing his paper with me.

8. Tim Marshall, *The Future of Geography: How Power and Politics in Space Will Change Our World* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2023); James Stavridis, *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans* (New York: Penguin, 2017).

9. For the economic trends, see ‘The World in 2050. The Long View: How Will the Global Economic Order Change by 2050?’, PwC, February 2017, www.pwc.com/gx/en/research-insights/economy/the-world-in-2050.html.

10. Samir Puri, *Westlessness: The Great Global Rebalancing* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2024). See also Tobias Bunde, ‘Beyond Westlessness: A Readout from the Munich Security Conference Special Edition 2021’, Munich Security Conference, Munich Security Brief 1, February 2021, https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/Munich_Security_Brief_Beyond_Westlessness_MSC_Special_Edition_2021_210224.pdf; ‘Das eigene Land wird in zehn Jahren sicherer /wohlhabender sein’, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, February 15, 2024, 5; Oliver Stuenkel, ‘The Post-Western World and the Rise of a Parallel Order’, *The Diplomat*, September 26, 2016, https://thediplomat.com/2016/09/the-post-western-world-and-the-rise-of-a-parallel-order.

11. Bruno Maçães, *The Dawn of Eurasia: On the Trail of the New World Order* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), 2.

12. E.g., J. Areddy, ‘Fearful of Getting Cut Off, China Pushes for Self-Reliance’, *Wall Street Journal*, May 3, 2022.

13. Don Rodney Junio, ‘WTO Sounds Alarm on Trade Risks as 2025 Outlook Weakens’, World Economic Forum, April 24, 2025, www.weforum.org/stories/2025/04/global-trade-decline-2025-international-trade-stories-this-month.

14. Stacie Goddard, ‘The Rise and Fall of Great-Power Competition: Trump’s New Spheres of Influence’, *Foreign Affairs* 104, no. 3 (2025): 8–23; John Raine, ‘The Deals-Based International Order’, *Survival* 67, no. 6 (2025): 73–78.

15. See William Hurst and Peter Trubowitz, ‘The Fantasy of a Grand Bargain Between America and China: Why Deadlock Is More Likely Than Détente’, *Foreign Affairs*, July 3, 2025.

16. Catherine Ashton, Gomes Lecture, February 21, 2025, at Emmanuel College Cambridge, ‘The Gomes Lecture 2025: The Rt Hon. the Baroness Ashton of Upholland LG GCMG’, YouTube, posted February 28, 2025, www.youtube.com/watch?v=J7xKmFFLJrM.

17. Edward Fishman, *Chokepoints: How the Global Economy Became a Weapon of War* (London: Elliott and Thompson, 2025).

18. In 2024 alone, China acquired $9.8 billion worth of overseas mining. See Ciaran McGrath, ‘China’s Horrifying Rush to Buy Key Resources as Beijing Spends £7.7 bn in String of Deals’, *Express*, July 6, 2025.

19. Alexander Wendt, ‘Why a World State Is Inevitable’, *European Journal of International Relations* 9, no. 4 (2003): 491–542.

Chapter Fifteen: The Regional Futures of the Great Powers

1. The phrase ‘new age of colonial conquest in the Americas’ is used by Daniel Immerwahr in his afterword of February 23, 2025, to the Japanese edition of his *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

2. Jeffrey McGee, David Edmiston, and Marcus Haward, *The Future of Antarctica: Scenarios from Classical Geopolitics* (Cham: Springer, 2022); Elizabeth Buchanan, ‘Great-Power Contestation Comes to Antarctica: China’s Scientific Push Tests the Continent’s Stability’, *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2024, www.foreignaffairs.com/arctic-antarctic/great-power-competition-comes-antarctica.

3. A positive vision for the region is set out in Patrick Milton, Michael Axworthy, and Brendan Simms in *Towards a Westphalia for the Middle East* (London: Hurst, 2018).

4. This is the useful categorisation in Glenn Herald Snyder, *Deterrence by Denial and Punishment* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959).

5. Richard Lloyd Parry, ‘Thais Plan “Land Bridge” to Avoid Perilous Strait’, *The Times* (London), November 28, 2023, 34.

6. I owe my understanding of this area, and much else in Asia, to many conversations with my colleague Professor William Hurst, co-director of the Centre for Geopolitics, University of Cambridge.

7. For the role of neutrals today, see Hugo Bromley and Eyck Freymann, *On Day One: An Economic Contingency Plan for a Taiwan Crisis*, CGSP Occasional Paper Series No. 4 (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution, 2024). For contrasting fictional scenarios, see Humphrey Hawksley and Simon Holberton, *Dragonstrike: The Millennium War* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1997), and Elliot Ackerman and James Stavridis, *2034: A Novel of the Next World War* (New York: Pamela Dorman Books, 2021). For an optimistic view of the West’s prospects, see Matthew Kroenig, *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy Versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the US and China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). A salutary warning against the assumption that history will necessarily repeat itself in a way favourable to the West can be found in Hal Brands, *The*

Eurasian Century: Hot Wars, Cold Wars and the Making of the Modern World (New York: Norton, 2025), 245 et passim.

8. For German and Japanese motivations, see Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, *Hitler's American Gamble: Pearl Harbor and the German March to Global War* (London: Allen Lane, 2021).

9. For 'Peak China', see Michael Beckley, 'The Peril of Peaking Powers: Economic Slowdowns and Implications for China's Next Decade', *International Security* 48, no. 1 (2023): 7–46.

10. Dmitri Trenin, 'World War III Has Already Begun', *Bangladesh Pratidin*, July 15, 2025.

11. See Brendan Simms and Charlie Laderman, 'What Hitler's War with America Reveals About Today's Great Power Rivalries', *New Statesman*, November 3, 2021; Philip Zelikow, 'Confronting Another Axis? History, Humility, and Wishful Thinking', *Texas National Security Review* 7, no. 3 (2024): 80–99; and Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great Power Rivalry Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022), 251.

12. Graham Allison, *Destined for War? Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017). Transition scenarios for the United States and China are numerous. Here is one interesting example, albeit now dated: David P. Rapkin and William R. Thompson, eds., *Transition Scenarios: China and the United States in the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013).

Credit: Justin Griffiths-Williams

BRENDAN SIMMS is a professor in the history of international relations and fellow at Peterhouse College, Cambridge. He is the author of eight previous books, including *Hitler's American Gamble* and *Europe*. He lives in Cambridge, United Kingdom.

Praise for
The Return of the Great Powers

“An exceedingly timely and very compelling book. Professor Brendan Simms provides a masterful chronicle of the evolution over the past two decades from a world of benign globalization, in which barriers to investment, capital flows, and trade were being reduced, to an era of renewed Great Power rivalries, in which all those barriers are being increased—from a world in which economics drove geopolitics to one in which geopolitics drives economics. The implications of this are enormous, and Simms describes all of it superbly.”

—General David Petraeus, former director of the CIA

“History is one of the most important guides to the new order that is rapidly forming around the world, and Brendan Simms is one of the most knowledgeable and formidable analysts of how the Great Powers will shape that order. Drawing on a breathtaking range of historical examples and brilliant geopolitical analysis, this book is a powerful guide to a fast-changing world.”

—Rana Mitter, Harvard Kennedy School

“Very, very occasionally a history book is written that shines powerful light on the state of contemporary geopolitics and makes sense of a process that has been hiding in plain sight. *The Return of the Great Powers*, with its profound perceptions about the present in the light of the past, is just such a work.”

—Andrew Roberts, author of *Churchill*

“This wide-ranging and provocative analysis of our changing geopolitical environment underscores why Brendan Simms is one of the greatest

contemporary scholars of international relations. Simms's narrative is replete with sharp observation and fine detail on key events, as well as clear explanation of critical concepts. It is as accessible to general audiences as it is valuable to fellow historians, and a genuine pleasure to read."

—Fiona Hill, author of *There Is Nothing for You Here*

"*The Return of the Great Powers* is a magisterial survey of the post−Cold War era, the rise and decline of the Liberal International Order, and the return of Great Power competition. This book will be of interest to practitioners, to students of diplomacy and conflict, and to general readers who are looking for informed insight into the current state of the world and where things might go next. Highly recommended—a 'must-read.'"

—Laurie Bristow, former UK ambassador to Afghanistan and Russia

RAISING READERS

Books Build Bright Futures

Thank you for reading this book and for being a reader of books in general. We are so grateful to share being part of a community of readers with you, and we hope you will join us in passing our love of books on to the next generation of readers.

Did you know that reading for enjoyment is the single biggest predictor of a child's future happiness and success?

More than family circumstances, parents' educational background, or income, reading impacts a child's future academic performance, emotional well-being, communication skills, economic security, ambition, and happiness.

Studies show that kids reading for enjoyment in the US is in rapid decline:

- In 2012, 53% of 9-year-olds read almost every day. Just 10 years later, in 2022, the number had fallen to 39%.
- In 2012, 27% of 13-year-olds read for fun daily. By 2023, that number was just 14%.

TOGETHER, WE CAN COMMIT TO RAISING READERS AND CHANGE THIS TREND.

HOW?

- Read to children in your life daily.
- Model reading as a fun activity.
- Reduce screen time.
- Start a family, school, or community book club.
- Visit bookstores and libraries regularly.
- Listen to audiobooks.
- Read the book before you see the movie.
- Encourage your child to read aloud to a pet or stuffed animal.
- Give books as gifts.
- Donate books to families and communities in need.

Books build bright futures, and **Raising Readers** is our shared responsibility.

For more information, visit JoinRaisingReaders.com

Sources: National Endowment for the Arts, National Assessment of Educational Progress, WorldBookDay.com, Nielsen BookData's 2023 "Understanding the Children's Book Consumer"

This file was downloaded from Z-Library project

Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.

z-library.sk z-lib.gs z-lib.fm go-to-library.sk

Official Telegram channel

Z-Access

https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library